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029
When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace
3

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The sun

Infinity Maria's coffin

Tennis racket

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CHARACTERS

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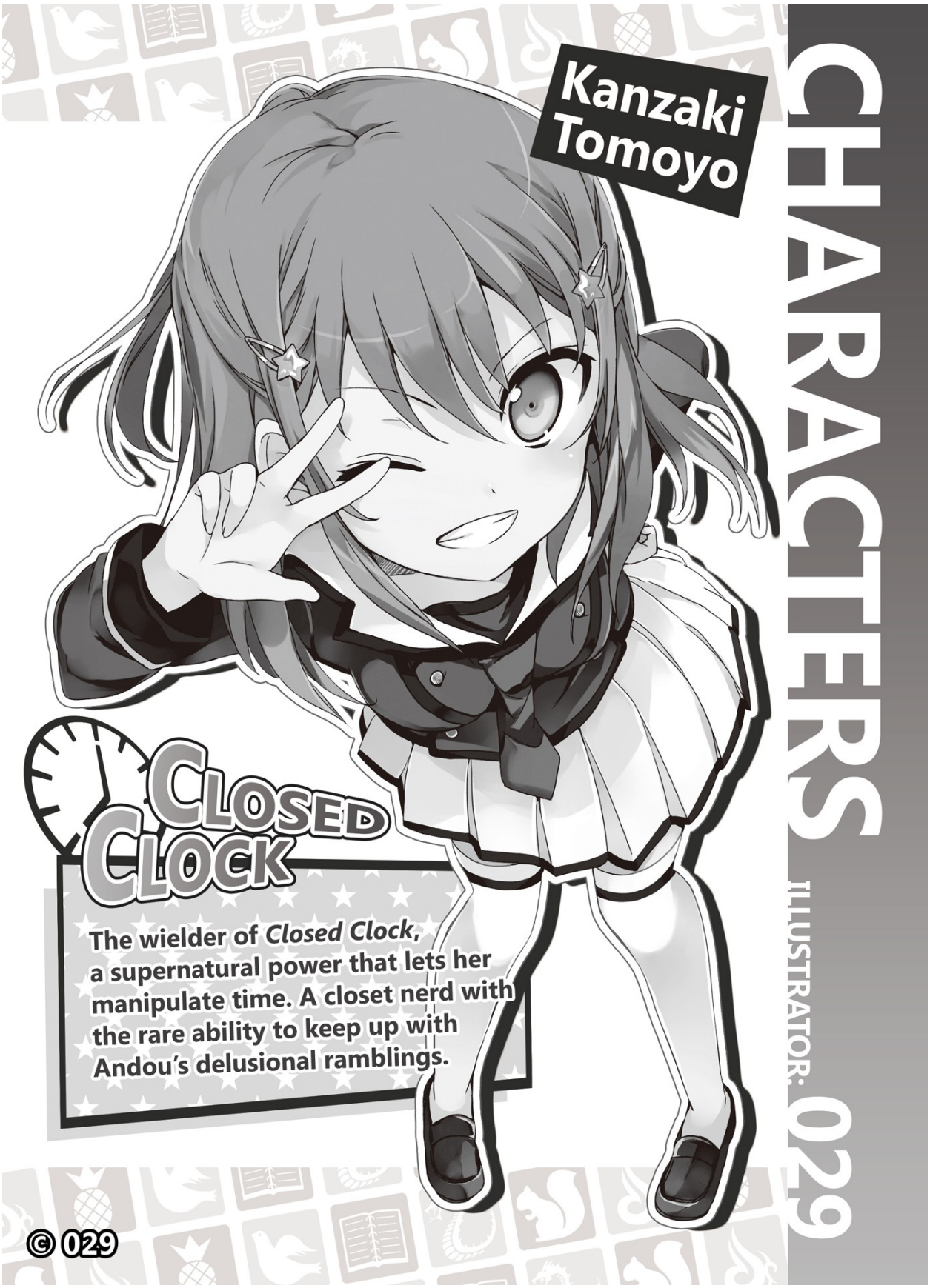
Kanzaki Tomoyo
Closed Clock
The wielder of *Closed Clock*, a supernatural power that lets her manipulate time. A closet nerd with the rare ability to keep up with Andou's delusional ramblings.

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Kushikawa Hatoko
A childhood friend of Andou's, whose power, *Over Element*, gives her absolute control over the forces of nature. She never understands a single word that comes out of Andou's mouth.
OVER ELEMENT
DARK AND DARK
A boy with a pathological case of chuunibyou and a love of supernatural battles that dates back to long before he obtained his own power. His power, *Dark and Dark*, lets him create lukewarm black fire...and nothing else.
Andou Jurai
Takanashi Sayumi
The mild-mannered and erudite president of the literary club. She's all but mastered her power, *Route of Origin*, which allows her to return anything and everything to the way it's meant to be. She mostly just uses it to mess with Andou, though.
ROUTE OF ORIGIN
WORLD CREATE
A fourth-grade elementary schooler who spends all of her time hanging out in a high school literary club, for some reason. Her power, *World Create*, gives her the ability to create matter and space freely, and she's less than reserved about using it.
Himeki Chifuyu

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Chapter 1: The Eccentricity of Himeki Chifuyu, Part Two

I feel like I probably don't need to say this, but for the record, you can't drop out of elementary school just because you feel like it. That's just not how it works—it's called *compulsory* education for a reason.

Speaking of dropping out, Chifuyu explained what had happened in more detail, and it all turned out to be remarkably mundane. Apparently, she'd gone up to her homeroom teacher after school the day before and told them that she wouldn't be coming to class starting tomorrow. Her teacher said "Yeah, sure you won't," and she took that as an agreement.

Chifuyu…that wasn't an agreement. That was your teacher brushing you off.

So anyway, I explained the intricacies of compulsory education and all that stuff to her, and she heaved a tiny little sigh before muttering, "Oh, okay. I guess I can't quit school, then."

And that's how I ended up escorting Chifuyu all the way from my school to hers first thing in the morning. I couldn't just leave her idling around on her own in front of a high school, could I? I'd probably end up blemishing my flawless attendance record as a result, but honestly, that was never something I'd been aiming for anyway—it just sorta happened. I've never been particularly obsessed with that stuff. Heck, I cut class pretty often back in middle school!

"Hey, Chifuyu?"

"Hmm?"

"Think you could give walking on your own two feet a try?" I asked, glancing over my shoulder at the little girl on my back.

Long story short: I said, "All right, we can go back to your school together," Chifuyu said, "Carry me, then," and the rest is history. Very confusing history, the logic of which I still haven't quite been able to put together, but the point is, I was walking along with an elementary schooler in place of a backpack.

"Can't."

"And why would that be?"

"Too tired."

Oh, she's tired, is she? Honestly, fair enough. Nothing we can do about that. She'd used up all of her walking-to-school energy walking to a totally *different* school, so it was no wonder her morning stamina reserves were running on fumes. I resigned myself to the fact that I'd be making the trek for both of us and kept plodding my way toward the elementary school.

Thankfully, Chifuyu was pretty light, and her school wasn't all that far away from mine in the first place. If I had to find *something* to complain

about, I'd probably go with the fact that the stares from all the other students who were currently on the way to school were a little grating.

Then again, no matter how light she was and how short the walk was, I might've made a major miscalculation by underestimating my own lack of stamina. Plus, Chifuyu was wearing her backpack, and I had my school bag in one of my hands as well.

"W-Wait a second," I gasped, veering off into a mostly abandoned park and setting Chifuyu down. "Just need a quick break..."

"Andou, are you okay?" she asked, sounding a little worried. On the one hand, the concern was appreciated, but on the *other* hand, this was all her fault in the first place, and part of me *really* wanted to call her out on it.

"Chifuyu...sorry, but I'm at my limit. Don't you think it's about time you just used *World Create*?" With her power, Chifuyu could create a portal—or a Gate, as I liked to call them—that would let her cover any distance in the blink of an eye. That's why I brought her into the park. Nobody was around to see her here, and it really did feel like the right time to let her power do the hard work and take her all the way to her school.

Chifuyu, however, shook her head. "There's lots of people in the morning. It'd be too hard to not get caught."

Hmm. I guess popping over to our club room after school and teleporting into her school in the morning aren't really comparable, challenge-wise. She hadn't said it was impossible, but the risk of getting caught was too high to justify, considering we weren't all that far away.

"Guess we'd better walk, then," I sighed.

"Yeah."

"But, y'know, I'm kinda about to collapse over here. Maybe we could call off the piggyback ride the rest of the way?"

"No." She crossed her arms in a sign of unilateral rejection.

Man, seriously? I racked my mind for a way to convince her to give my poor back a rest, but before I had any decent ideas, Chifuyu puffed up her cheeks and started sorta sadly mumbling. "I like riding on your back."

"Huh...?"

"Your back's big, and warm, and comfy."

"..."

"And reliable, and manly, and suuuper cool."

"..."

"But, if you *really* don't wanna carry me, that's okay. I'm a good girl, so I won't complain."

"Perish the thought, my lady!" Before I even knew what I was doing, I'd spun around 180 degrees and knelt down on the spot, gesturing to my back with a spirited thumbs-up. "Climb aboard!"

Chifuyu nodded with satisfaction and hopped aboard my back. "Thanks. Andou, you really are too eas— I mean, a super nice person."

"Oh, I'm just doing what any guy in my position would do!" I declared, springing to my feet and setting off toward the elementary school with a

skip in my step.

“Good job, Andou. You have my praise,” said Chifuyu, patting me on the head as I gasped and heaved for breath. Going through a workout like *that* first thing in the morning was hell, sure, but Chifuyu head pats were enough to make it all worthwhile. Cuteness, after all, makes the world go round!

I finally managed to catch my breath and look up at the elementary school in front of me. Yokoi Elementary (or just Yokoi, as the locals tended to call it for short) was a perfectly normal public school, but it must’ve undergone some renovations recently. The facilities looked distinctly new and up to date.

“Chii!”

A girl sprang out from the school’s entrance, dashing over to where we were resting by the gate. She looked like she was about Chifuyu’s age, and she was around her height as well, with big, strikingly bright eyes and her hair tied up in a fashionable ponytail.

“Come *on*, Chii, do you realize how late you are?! I was worried about you! Ahh, and look, your ribbon’s all messy again! You’re a girl, Chii, so you have to keep yourself nice and cute! Here, let me... Okay, much better! Put Squirrely in your backpack for now, okay? The teacher will give you *another* lecture if you get caught carrying him around again! And that’s not even *starting* on...”

The little girl kept jabbering on and on as she gave Chifuyu a once-over, correcting all the sloppy little flaws in her appearance with an impressively practiced hand. Chifuyu, meanwhile, just let it happen without so much as a word of protest. It sort of felt like this whole exchange was a matter of routine for both of them.

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“All right, that should do it!” The girl nodded with satisfaction at a job well done, then finally tore her eyes away from Chifuyu for long enough to notice me. “Ah! U-Umm, good morning,” she stammered.

“Yeah, morning,” I casually replied.

The girl leaned in to whisper in Chifuyu’s ear. “Hey, Chii, who is this person? Was he *carrying* you just a minute ago?”

“He’s Andou,” replied Chifuyu.

The girl’s eyes widened. She turned to face me again and gave me a polite bow. “Y-You’re *the* Andou?! I’ve heard all about you! Thank you for always taking such good care of Chii,” she said, sounding almost like she considered herself Chifuyu’s legal guardian.

“Umm, I mean, yeah, I’m Andou,” I replied. “And wait, you’ve heard all about me? Like, what sort of things have you heard?” Could it be—does she know that I’m the reincarnation of the Dark Lord Guiltia, he who ruled the demon realm with an iron fist?! If so…then she must not be allowed to leave this place alive!

“You’re part of the literary club that Chii always hangs out in, aren’t you? She tells me about you all the time!” said the girl, immediately betraying my expectations. *Okay, so apparently, she hasn’t heard* all *about me after all.*

“Let me introduce myself,” she continued. “I’m Chii’s friend, and my name is Kuki Madoka.”

I gasped. I *shuddered*. In the blink of an eye, I was covered in goose bumps, and my heart was pounding like a war drum. The name she spoke—*her* name—pierced me to my very core. *Kuki? Did she just say her name…was Kuki Madoka?*

“Hey…” I began, intent on confirming the suspicion that was setting my spirit aflutter. “You said your name’s Kuki? Is that written with the character for ‘nine’ as the ku and the character for ‘demon’ as the ki?”

“Yes, it is.”

“O-Okay, so then…how’s ‘Madoka’ written?”

“My given name’s written with just one character—the one for ‘circle.’”

I fell to my knees on the spot. Kuki Madoka. The sheer degree to which her name had shaken my soul was genuinely unfathomable. How could this be? How could a child like her—a little girl so undoubtedly well-behaved and diligent—be the bearer of a name like that…?

Kuki Madoka.

That is hella, hella, hella cool! Like, holy crap, that friggin’ name! It could be the name of a swordsman’s most powerful special move, completely unaltered! Like, a secret technique passed down through the generations of a bloodline that inherited their power from nine legendary demons!

You could be all “For the likes of you, the Demon of the Third Circle alone shall suffice… Fiendish beast that slumbers within my blood, devour

the foe before me!" and crap! And the Ninth Circle Demon could be, like, super dangerous or something, so you're supposed to keep it sealed away under all circumstances! But then a super strong enemy shows up, and you have to use it anyway! And then the demon goes on a rampage and threatens to devour your very being! But your friends' voices pull you back to sanity at the very last second! Hooooly crap, this is so good!

"U-Umm, Andou?"

Ah! Whoops—simmer down, back to reality. I'd let the absolutely *insane* coolness of the name "Kuki Madoka" sweep me off my feet in a very literal sense and was still kneeling on the ground.

"Hey, Chii? Is this guy, you know, all right?"

"Don't worry about him. Andou's just a dummy."

"Oh, okay... Jeez, high schoolers sure are scary."

There I was, enduring the pitying gazes of a couple of elementary schoolers who seemed to consider me sub-human in the saddest sort of way. I cleared my throat, stood up, and carried on the conversation as if nothing unusual had happened whatsoever.

"Oh, Chifuyu's friend? I see, I see!"

"Yeah. Cookie's my friend," agreed Chifuyu. Cookie, I assumed, was her nickname for Kuki. The sinister aura of the Nine Demons was swept away in the blink of an eye.

Man, what a shame. I'll sure as hell be calling her Kuki, though, and pronouncing each of its syllables with all the malevolence I can muster! Maybe I'll call her Lady Kuki? That feels like it'd fit the ambience.

"Everyone at school says that Cookie's my mom," continued Chifuyu.

"Your mom?" I repeated.

"N-No, don't get the wrong idea!" shouted Kuki, frantically waving her arms in the air. "It's just, umm...Chii's always so laid-back about everything and always does her own thing, you know? So I just sort of end up doing all sorts of stuff for her... Ah, I'm not complaining, though! I'm totally okay with it!"

Hm-hmm. I see how it is. Kuki, in short, was more or less Chifuyu's personal attendant. Chifuyu had always lived her life with the attitude of a blue-blooded princess, unbound by the societal norms that dictated the lives of us commoners, so she probably needed a friend like Kuki who'd be willing to take care of all her worldly affairs.

"Gotcha, gotcha! Okay then, Kuki, I'll just go ahead and pass Chifuyu off to you. Take good care of her, okay?" I said, acting like I was Chifuyu's dad, or older brother, or something.

"O-Of course I will!" replied Kuki, sounding unamused and looking a little sullen for some reason. "Chii's my friend, after all! Come on, Chii, let's get going."

"Okay," grunted Chifuyu.

"It was nice meeting with you, Andou. Have a nice day."

"Bye-bye, Andou."

The two of them vanished off into the school. It sort of felt like Kuki had gotten a little distant with me at the end there—or maybe a little curt? But I figured that that was probably just the natural reaction for an elementary school girl meeting a high school boy out of the blue.

I left the elementary school behind, walking back the way I'd come. Considering the current time, I figured that as long as I kept up a reasonably speedy pace, I might still be able to make it to my own school on time.

"Ah..." Suddenly, a thought struck me. "Now that I think about it, I never asked Chifuyu *why* she wanted to drop out of school, did I?" I'd been in such a hurry, it had completely slipped my mind.

Eh, who hasn't *wanted to drop out of school at least once or twice, though?* Judging by her attitude about the whole thing, I couldn't imagine there was any incredibly serious issue motivating her. I declared the case closed without sparing it another thought and rushed off to try and beat the bell.

At that point, I still hadn't grasped the situation at all. I hadn't picked up on Chifuyu's motives, nor Kuki's intentions. More than anything, though, I hadn't appreciated how hopelessly optimistic the conclusion I'd reached really was...

CHARACTER FILE 08

Hey, Chii, who is this person?

Kuki Madoka
Yokoi Elementary, fourth year, class 1
Blood type: A

Chifuyu's friend, or as her elementary school classmates refer to her, Chifuyu's mom. Her name is just so, *so* cool, I seriously can't even! It's the sort of name that gets passed down through the generations of a warrior clan, a name that's granted only to its strongest member!

"None shall be allowed to disgrace the name Kuki Madoka!" "How *dare* the likes of you speak the name Kuki Madoka?!" "It's you...the strongest of our line! The very first Kuki Madoka!"

I'm hoping at least one of those lines gets dropped before long!

Chapter 2: Super-Tennis Is Super Fun, Right?

I twisted my upper body, pulling my racket back into a ready position, then uncurled, using the rotation of my hips to swing it with all my might. The ball impacted right in the middle of the racket's strings, streaking away in a drive shot. I felt a faint tingle in my hand—the characteristic sensation you got when you hit the ball right in the racket's sweet spot. Needless to say, I didn't skimp on the shot's follow-through either.

The ball's trajectory was sharp, and it was heading straight for the corner of my foe's court. I pumped an internal fist. My shot had been perfect! So perfect, it was almost too good to be true! Absolutely no points deducted in terms of its speed *or* its course! And to top it all off, my opponent was currently off-balance on the exact opposite side of the court. No human being could possibly make it to the ball from her position in time, no matter how talented a sprinter they were. I'd *won*!

"Think again!"

I couldn't believe my eyes. There, directly in the path of my unbeatable shot, stood the same girl who'd been across the court an infinitesimal fraction of a second earlier, smirking provocatively at me. She'd caught up to the ball that could not be caught—no, it was something even more astonishing than that! It was like she'd been standing there from the very beginning, racket calmly raised into a ready position! Whatever move she'd just pulled, it had been all results, no action!

Curses! How could I forget? I'm not facing just any opponent—I'm up against the sovereign ruler of time herself, Kanzaki Tomoyo! With Closed Clock, the power to stop time, on her side, there's no such thing as an uncatchable ball! In other words, the entire court is her absolute dominion!

"But...but then, how...how the hell am I supposed to put up a decent fight?!" I wailed with rage and horror.

"Too bad for you, Andou! It's *over*!"

I was facing the sort of despair you'd only feel after encountering an enemy with the power to steal your Bankai, but Tomoyo was grinning triumphantly as she brought her racket to bear! She slammed the ball right back into my court...or so I thought. Instead, the ball slammed right into the net with a pathetic little *pft*, then dropped to the ground. Point: me.

We stared at the ball. The silence was unbearable.

"Tomoyo. Please. You just...you just don't hit the net in that sort of moment! What's the point of stopping time to catch the ball if you're just gonna whiff the shot?!" Think about all the effort I just wasted on that despairing reaction! Also, don't try to pull off a cool finishing line if you're about to make the most basic error in the rule book!

“G-Get off my back, okay?! Tennis is a lot harder than it looks!” shouted Tomoyo, who was blushing fiercely.

“And ‘it’s over’? Really…?”

“Ugggh! Wh-Whatever, who cares?! It was just an impulse! Lay off!”

“You could’ve tried harder than *that*! It’s so unoriginal!”

“*That’s* the part that bothers you?! Not the fact that I tried to pull off a finishing line?!”

“You gotta put your own spin on it, y’know? Like, say…‘Game, set, and you’re *finished*!’ or something.”

“Nobody cares about your taste when it comes to these things!” jabbed Tomoyo, ever fast on the callouts.

Anyway, you’ve probably already put this together, but we of the literary club had decided to play tennis on that particular day. We weren’t going through some summertime training arc, and we weren’t preparing for our school’s sports day or anything like that. We just sorta felt like playing tennis and ended up using our club time to do so, because why not?

A normal club would’ve had to go out into town, find a court to borrow, and rent a set of gear, but happily enough, *we* had a member with the ultimate power of Genesis on our side! *World Create* could make us rackets and balls aplenty, of course, but Chifuyu had gone above and beyond and even manifested uniforms and an entire pocket-dimension tennis court for us to play in.

Gotta say, it’s really nice having somebody with a power like that in the group! It’s like she’s walking around with a whole ROUND1 in her back pocket. That settles it—I’m adding “Boxed Elysium: The Pocket-Sized ROUND1” to Chifuyu’s list of titles!

“I gotta admit, though,” I sighed, looking down at my racket, “tennis really *is* pretty tough.”

Sayumi was familiar with the game and had given us a rundown of its rules and fundamentals, but for every one of those fundamentals we’d figured out, there was a mountain of them that weren’t working out at all. Neither of us were capable of hitting an overhand serve in-bounds, for one thing, and when we tried to hit a heavy return in a rally, it inevitably turned into a home run instead. It took us almost an hour just to get our rallies even remotely consistent.

“We might’ve jumped into a real match too early,” admitted Tomoyo. “Neither of us are good enough at this yet. We sure as hell don’t measure up to *that*, anyway,” she said, glancing over at the neighboring court where Sayumi and Hatoko were engaged in a seemingly never-ending rally. The ball sailed back and forth, bouncing off their rackets with a light pinging noise.

Dang, those two are good! They’ve got a proper rally going and everything!

“I’m not surprised about Sayumi,” Tomoyo added, “but I wasn’t expecting Hatoko to be that good at this game.”

“Oh, yeah, she was on the soft tennis club back in middle school,” I explained. Hatoko had always been astonishingly athletic. You’d think she’d be as clumsy as could be, but no, she had great reflexes and was way more coordinated than she looked. Normal tennis and soft tennis have plenty of differences, of course, but it looked like the skills she’d picked up playing one still applied pretty well to the other.

As for why Sayumi was so good at tennis...honestly, I didn’t even think to question it. I would’ve been significantly more surprised to find out that she was *bad* at it, really.

Eventually, the ball got caught on the net, ending the rally. Sayumi pulled out a new ball from the pocket of her skort and hit a serve.

Yes, you read that right: her skort. We were all dressed to the nines in proper tennis fashion, and that meant polo shirts and skorts for the girls. Sayumi was even wearing a visor, which made the whole ensemble look incredibly authentic. We had Chifuyu to thank for our choice of clothing, of course. The sheer number of applications for her power was seriously out of this world.

Though, all that said...I do have to wonder why people wear skorts when they play tennis. They get all, y’know, fluttery and stuff when you move, and, like...how to put it? Honestly, seeing that doesn’t excite me or turn me on or anything so much as it makes me feel uneasy. It’s like, I can’t tell if it’s all right for me to look or not!

“And just what’re *you* looking at?” said Tomoyo, giving me a death glare. She must’ve noticed where my eyes were glued. “Lecher.”

“Wha—why, you—n-no, I wasn’t looking! And I *definitely* wasn’t thinking about how great it is that they totally cover you up but make it seem like you just *might* be able to catch a glimpse of something!”

Then she jabbed me with her racket. *Ouch.* A moment later, Tomoyo seemed to realize something and grabbed the hem of her skort, glaring at me with an even sharper intensity than before and blushing all over again.

Suddenly, I felt the need to defend myself. “C-Come on, isn’t the whole point of a skort that it covers your undies even if it gets flipped?! It’s not like you’re flashing people or anything, so why bother getting embarrassed about it?!”

“You’re not exactly wrong—it *does* come with an underskirt and all—but that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t like getting leered at!”

Ugh. Girls are such a pain about this sort of thing. They wear risqué outfits then chew you out for having the gall to look at them. Seriously, what’s a guy supposed to do?

“Okay, then why not just wear a tracksuit?” I countered.

“Because... Well, I mean, I just sorta wanted to try wearing a real tennis outfit at least once...”

Hmm. Come to think of it, Hatoko told me that she only joined the soft tennis club because their uniforms were cute. Maybe there’s just something about tennis outfits that makes them universally appealing to girls?

“Anyway,” Tomoyo continued, “more than anything else, I don’t wanna hear *you* of all people judging my sense of fashion! What the hell possessed you to dress like *that*?”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean? What’s wrong with my outfit?”

Said outfit consisted of a T-shirt, a pair of shorts, and a long-sleeved tracksuit top. I hadn’t even bothered wrapping my arm with bandages or putting on a pair of fingerless gloves! There was *nothing* about the way I was dressed that should’ve made Tomoyo get on my case like that!

“How about the fact that you’re wearing your jacket like a cape?” Tomoyo replied, identifying the problem with incredible specificity.

“Huh? What’s wrong with that? It looks cooler like this, right?” I asked, taking a quick look at myself. Yup, definitely cool. Draping a jacket over your shoulders like a cape: hella cool, for sure. It has, like, a certain vibe, I guess? Whatever you call it, it absolutely exudes that certain something!

“That’s a look that only the captain of a powerhouse tennis club can pull off. And *only* in manga.”

“What? You’re kidding, right…? Do you have any idea how much effort I’ve been putting into keeping this look up?! I can barely lift my arms at all without knocking the jacket off my shoulders!”

“I was *wondering* why you haven’t tried to hit a single smash this whole time…”

“I thought I’d done a perfect job of putting together mundane, everyday items into a super stylish outfit too…”

“Gotta admit, it’s pretty amazing how you can draw out the chuuni potential of even the most insignificant things. You’ve gone so far past the point of reason here, I’m actually kind of impressed,” sighed Tomoyo, shaking her head. “Anyway, playing tennis while wearing your jacket like a cape’s *way* beyond you. Unless you’re literally Yukimura from *Prince of Tennis*, there’s no way you could pull that—”

“Stop,” I snapped, holding out a hand and cutting Tomoyo off.

“Wh-What…?”

“Careful about name-dropping other series like that. You can’t be that casual about jumping into a parody.”

A lengthy moment of silence ensued…

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaat?! Are! You! Kidding me?!”

…and then Tomoyo *shrieked*, her face painted over with an expression of pure betrayal.

“A-Are you *seriously* saying that?! After *everything* you’ve done up till now?! You?! *You*, of all people?!”

“I know, I know, just calm down and listen,” I said, doing my best to soothe Tomoyo’s indignant fury. I’d had this on my mind throughout the whole exercise, and it seemed like the perfect chance to explain myself. “Basically, I’m thinking we should put out a blanket ban on *Prince of Tennis* riffs today.”

“Why?! What could *possibly* justify that?!”

“Mostly, it’s that the moment we decided to do tennis, I could just *tell* that you were all thinking ‘Man, Andou’s totally gonna make a ton of *Prince of Tennis* jokes.’”

“Oh my *god*, have you ever considered visiting the real world every once in a while?! Nobody was thinking that!”

Hmm…or so she claims, but I know better. They were totally expecting me to call one of my shots the 108th level something-or-other, or structure a gag around the Andou Kingdom, or whatever. They have to have been expecting me to go all out on the Prince of Tennis parodies. I mean, come on, this is the long-awaited tennis chapter, for crying out loud!

But they thought wrong! Oh, how they’ve underestimated me! I knew perfectly well that they knew I’d go in that direction, so I deliberately chose not to do so! I don’t wanna do something that anyone could come up with! A life spent playing by the rules is a life wasted, and you can count me out of that! I’m all about betraying expectations, and if somebody anticipates me doing something, I always strive to rise above whatever they think they see coming!

“Always taking the road untraveled and never going with the flow—that’s me!”

“The way you get so *weirdly* obsessed with not letting people predict what you’re going to do is just so, *so* disgustingly chuuni of you, I swear…”

“So, yeah, that was kinda roundabout, but the point is if you’re gonna do a tennis manga parody, I’d say go with something *other* than *Prince of*—oh, dang, did you see how intense that shot Sayumi just hit was?! She’s the spitting image of the Red Bullet himself! Ooh, but Hatoko’s shot bounced off the net and just barely made it in! What was that move, the Royal Phoenix #1?!”

“Sorry, but I’m not keeping up with this at *all*!”

At around the time Tomoyo tapped out of the conversation, Sayumi and Hatoko had concluded their rally and walked over in our direction.

“Shall we change opponents?” suggested Sayumi. The rest of us quickly agreed, with the exception of Chifuyu, who had been napping in a sunny patch of the court ever since she’d used her power to make it. As such, we’d ended up with a perfect group of four for tennis. We played rock-paper-scissors to make new pairings, and I ended up squaring off against Hatoko.

“Okay, here goes, Juu!” she shouted.

“Mwa ha ha! I’ll give you a peek into the darkest nightmares of my infernal soul! Oh, and no overhand serves, okay? They’re too fast; I can’t hit ’em back.”

“Okey dokey!”

I’d whispered that last request, and Hatoko cheerfully agreed without a second thought. She could be really nice like that, sometimes. Hatoko tossed the ball into the air and thwacked it toward me with an underhand serve.

“Here goes! Firebaaall!”

Huh? "Fireball"? I had a terrible feeling, but as the ball sailed toward me, I reflexively took up a stance, prepared to return it.

And then the ball *literally caught fire*. I'm talking one second tennis ball, next second, *fwumph*, raging inferno orb. That'd be one of *Over Element*'s aspects: the power to control flame!

"G-Gaaaaaahhh!" I shrieked, dodging out of the way at the last second by pure instinct. Holy crap! Hooooly crap, fireballs are friggin' scary! I mean, of course they are, they're straight up balls of fire!

"Ah-ah! You're not supposed to dodge, Juu, you have to hit the ball back!" scolded Hatoko.

"As if I could!" I shouted. A tennis ball that catches fire midair was the sort of special move I'd expect to come up in a manga aimed at elementary schoolers. It wasn't *bad*, as far as special moves went, but it definitely felt a little, I dunno, uninspired? That is, it did until I saw one up close and personal in real life and realized that they were downright *terrifying*. *Real-world fireballs:* hella *scary!*

"You can't? Oh, okay... I thought that since you use fire too, you'd be able to return a flaming ball," explained Hatoko. She almost certainly didn't mean anything bad by it, but somehow, her words came across as weirdly provocative to me. As if I could just sit down and take a statement like that!

"Mwa ha ha! Interesting... In that case, it's a contest! Let us see which of us can truly claim greater mastery over our flames!" I thrust my right arm out before me, racket and all, and prepared to release the accursed power that dwelled in it. To do that, of course, I would first need to recite the Malediction of Unleashing! "I am he who conquers chaos! O purgatorial flame that sways upon the brink of the Abyss, O twisted blaze of—"

"Ahh! Sorry, Juu! I already served!"

"—sable...huh? Oh god *aaaaaaugh*!"

I canceled the Malediction midsentence and frantically took up a stance to return the shot. Unfortunately, I wasn't quick enough, and my racket whiffed pathetically through the air.

"Dang it, Hatoko! How many times have I told you not to attack when I'm mid-Malediction?!"

"But, but, it wasn't my fault! *You're* the one who just started chanting it out of nowhere! You have to say 'I'm gonna chant now' first!"

"I don't wanna! That's not how these things work; power incantations *always* come out of nowhere! Nobody *ever* stops to say they're about to start chanting mid-supernatural battle, and bad guys always have the decency to sit around and wait until they're finished!"

"Booo!"

"Sheesh, you're impossible..." I sighed deeply. Restarting the whole process after all that would feel even less dramatically appropriate than just going for it, so I decided to omit the Malediction and bring out my power then and there. The Tartarean flames of *Dark and Dark* sprung to life, dancing about my right arm in a roiling sea of pitch-blackness.

My flames were as stupidly cool as ever that day, of course, but I wasn't planning on stopping there. My plan was to extend the blaze from my arm onto my racket, coating it in a fiery veil! That's right: I was going for a form change, the same skill I'd trained a while back for the sake of using my power to create a black dragon!

I closed my eyes and sharpened my focus to a knife's edge, envisioning my power taking on a new form. If I had to compare it with something… Ah, that's it! It was just like Shu, the technique Nen ability wielders use to extend their Ten to strengthen weapons and stuff!

"Grrraaaaaahhhhhh!" I shouted, pouring every ounce of my body and soul into inciting a form change in *Dark and Dark*! I coaxed my flames toward the racket, step by step! *Closer, closer, closer!*

And…I failed.

Nope. Can't pull it off. Form changes really are *way harder than you'd think they'd be.* I knew when to accept that I was attempting the impossible, so I quickly gave up and resolved to play tennis the normal way.

"Okay, Hatoko, here I come!"

"Kaaay!"

"You gave up on that *way* too quickly! What the hell was all that buildup *fhhngh*!" jabbed Tomoyo from the next court over. Not really sure what happened, but the last bit of her sentence sounded less like a word and more like a muffled groan.

"Ah, Tomoyo! You shouldn't try to call him out mid-rally, it's dangerous!" shouted Sayumi, sounding a little concerned. I glanced over to find Tomoyo hunched over, clutching her side. Best I could tell, she'd taken one of Sayumi's shots right in the flank.

"O-Oh, I'll get you for this one, Andou," growled Tomoyo.

Oh, come on! How was that my fault? If you're gonna blame anyone for this, blame yourself and your own irresistible impulse to pick holes in everything I say.

I turned my attention back to my own court. "Okay, Hatoko, hit another fireball at me! I'll hit it back this time for sure!"

"Okay! Here goes!"

Once again, a raging orb of flame sailed into my side of the court. And oh, jeez, it really *was* scary, but I knew it was coming and wasn't nearly as freaked out as I had been the first time. *C-Calm down. It'll be fine! Remember what Kenshin said when he fought Shishio: "Don't let the flames deceive you! The fire itself is hardly lethal at all!"* I fixed my gaze on the ball and prepared to return it!

"Haaahhhhhh!" I shouted once more, overcoming my fear and pouring my whole body into swinging my racket with all my might! And what did I get for my trouble?

"I-It punched right through it?!"

Well, more like it *burned* through it, really. The second the ball impacted my racket's strings, I heard a quick sizzle. By the time I realized that I could

smell something burning, the ball had already scorched a sizable hole in the racket's center.

Right. I guess that would happen. Considering that tennis racket strings are, well, strings, of course they'd be weak to heat.

"Heh heh heh! How was *that*, Juu?" asked Hatoko with a proud smile.

"What do you *mean*, 'how was that'?! No way in hell anyone could ever return that shot!"

"Huh? But Sayumi returned it just a minute ago."

"Seriously?!"

"Yeah. She repaired the racket's strings the moment they hit the ball and sent it back just fine."

"Ooh, so she used *Route of Origin*?" That was certainly one hell of a countermeasure. Apparently, an astonishingly high-level super-tennis match had been taking place right next to me, and I'd never even noticed.

In any case, hitting back a fireball was clearly beyond my capabilities, so Hatoko and I decided to play a perfectly normal game of tennis instead. I swapped out my half-incinerated racket no problem, by the way. Chifuyu had made a ton of them back when we started this whole activity, so we had a literal pile of spares off on the side.

"Oh, whoops! Sorry, my bad!" I shouted partway through a rally. I'd skimmed the ball with my racket's frame, and it had sailed off in totally the wrong direction. It was on track to land *way* out of bounds.

"It's okay!" replied Hatoko in a perfectly carefree tone. The next instant, a powerful gale blew. She'd used another of *Over Element*'s aspects, the power of wind, to create a precisely localized burst of air that corrected the ball's course and delivered it directly to her. She hit it back to me, and our rally resumed without a hitch.

Oh, I see now. No matter where a shot's supposed to go, if you can manipulate the wind, you can just blow the ball right to you. She could hit every shot without taking a single step! It's almost like the Tezuka Zo—oh, whoops! Almost forgot Prince of Tennis references are banned today.

"Mwa ha ha! You hear it, don't you, *Over Element*? Yes—you hear the voice of the wind!"

"Huh? Does the wind have a voice?"

"It does indeed, and only we who are truly beloved by the winds can hear it!"

"Oh, wow! What sorta voice is it? Does it sound nice?" asked Hatoko, apparently in complete earnestness.

No, that's not... Look, the voice of the wind is, like, one of those things you just sorta say! It's a metaphor, you know? You're not supposed to ask what specifically it sounds like, it's just a thing!

"U-Umm," I floundered, "It sounds...s-sorta winded, I guess?"

"The voice of the wind sounds *winded*?!"

“Yeah, that’s it! The wind doesn’t work out enough, and gets out of breath super easily. Weird, considering it’s always blowing all over the place.”

“I didn’t know! Okay, then how does it sound when it’s *not* out of breath?”

“I-It sounds…like, uhh…like an anime character.”

“An anime character?!”

“Yeah, and the wind’s actually super sensitive about it! That’s why it barely ever talks.”

“Oh, huh… Ah, I get it now! That must be why it only talks to the people it loves!”

“Th-That’s exactly right!”

“Oh, wow! That’s sorta romantic, isn’t it?”

“R-Right? Anyway, that’s enough talking, Hatoko. Focus on the rally, okay?”

“Okaaay!”

With the conversation brought to a sudden, forced conclusion, we went back to thwacking the ball around.

A short while later, Chifuyu sat up from her impromptu nap zone in the corner. She climbed to her feet and slowly wandered over to our court. “I’ll play too,” she droned.

“Oh? You’re up for some tennis, Chifuyu?”

Apparently, it was time for another lineup swap! This time, Chifuyu and I ended up squaring off against each other.

“Mwa ha ha!” I cackled. “Do you truly believe, Himeki Chifuyu, that the likes of *you* has the power to stand against my might?” It finally felt like I was up against an opponent I held the upper hand against, and I was maybe getting just a little bit full of myself as a result. Meanwhile, the high school girls’ division started whispering off to the side.

“For somebody who begs for mercy when he’s up against an opponent who’s better than him, that guy sure has a way of talking himself up the second he thinks he’s on top,” muttered Tomoyo.

“He *does* vividly bring to mind the sort of self-important bit character who gets humiliated by the protagonist in the first chapter of a manga,” noted Sayumi.

“Honestly,” whispered Hatoko, “Juu’s just not very good at tennis at all!”

Three blades pierced my heart from different directions. Dammit, guys, can’t you just let me have this?! Am I never allowed to talk myself up just a little?!

“Don’t underestimate me, Andou,” boasted my opponent in her usual monotone. “I’ve never played tennis…but I have *World Create* to help me!”

“Ack!” That’s right! She does! It’s still way too early to assume I have an advantage!

World Create gave Chifuyu the ultimate power of creation, and its versatility couldn’t be underestimated in a pinch. It goes without saying that

making any form of matter she pleased at any moment was useful beyond measure, but the ability to even create *space* took her power to a whole new level. There was no situation it couldn't prove useful in. She could even make fire and water if she wanted, though we agreed way back whenever that using *World Create* for that sort of thing was off the table. Couldn't have her power set overlapping with Hatoko's, after all! The power to create anything, in short, was unfathomably fearsome.

"Ah, I made a mistake," said Chifuyu, just as I was gulping in fear of the match to come. "I meant 'but I have *Sweet and Sour Pineapple* to help me!'"

"Nope, nope, nooope! We agreed that name was off the table, didn't we?!" We'd been through that conversation before, I swear, but apparently Chifuyu still hadn't given up on it yet.

"But I like Sweet and Sour Pineapple better than World Create."

"No way, no how! *World Create* is a *billion* times cooler!"

"My power lets me bring things that shouldn't exist into the world…just like the pineapple in sweet and sour pork."

"Stop trying to justify this!" Please, at this rate, it's gonna stick! It's starting to feel like that's actually the power's name!

"Hmmph!" grunted Chifuyu, her lips pursed poutily. "It's *my* power, so I can call it whatever I want."

"Ugh!"

She'd played the ultimate trump card. There was nothing I could say to argue against that one. But I couldn't give up! Giving up would mean game over for real! The name-change crisis had me in a corner, for sure, but I still had one last desperate means of fighting back: pigheaded stubbornness!

"B-But '*World Create*' is really cool, right? I mean, how can *any* word be cooler than 'world'? It's the *world*, for crying out loud! Putting the world itself in your power name practically guarantees that you'll end up being the final boss!"

"Okay, then I'll call it *World Pineapple*."

"Don't just mix them together! That's a recipe for disaster!" What would World Pineapple even do?! Turn the world into a pineapple?! Turn pineapples into worlds?!

"It's a compromise."

"A compromise has to satisfy *both* sides! It's not a compromise if it doesn't!" I sighed heavily, and Chifuyu sighed right along with me. In her case, it seemed more like a sigh of exasperation than despair, though.

"Okay," she said. "I'm a good girl, so I'll put up with *World Create*."

"R-Really?"

"Yeah."

"Hurray! Woohoo!" Stubbornness wins the day! I've protected my name to the end!

Chifuyu was giving me the sort of look that a kindly sister would give to her obnoxious brat of a little brother, and getting that sort of look from an elementary schooler was a little, well, *y'know*, but I was too ecstatic to let it

bother me much. I may have won an argument with a fourth-grader through pure persistence, but let the record show that *I* don't think that was immature of me *at all*!

"Okay, Andou," Chifuyu muttered with a fearless look in her eyes, "time to get a taste of *World Create*." Barely a moment later, she activated her ability and made her move.

"What...the...?" I gasped, speechless.

I mean, okay, I said "what the," so I wasn't technically speechless at all. Calling *that* speechless meant I was making about as much sense as the sort of random mook who'd say something like "Ha ha ha! That's so funny, I forgot to laugh!" The point is, I was just *that* flabbergasted!

Chifuyu had used her power to give herself the upper hand in a way that totally *could've* rendered me speechless, in a certain sense of the word. *World Create* truly was the ultimate all-purpose power, but how, exactly, did our fair Lady of Genesis choose to give herself an edge in a game like tennis?

"Dual-wielding," Chifuyu declared, her tone just dripping with confidence. In her right hand, she held a racket. In her left hand, she held *another* racket.

And I...was overcome with a sense of indescribable exhaustion. Really? Chifuyu, you had the ultimate power of creation backing you up, and your master plan was to use it to let you dual-wield?

"Andou."

"Y-Yeah?"

"One plus one...equals *two*." She *really* did her best to sell that line. The look on her face was so hilariously smug, you'd think she'd just laid out the fundamental truth of the universe itself. "And that means that just now...my power level *doubled*."

I feel like I'm learning a lot about how math works in Chifuyuland. She wasn't kidding, that much was clear, so I decided to just leave well enough alone and move things forward. Come to think of it, is it against the rules to use two rackets in tennis? I know that using two swords in kendo falls into a sorta gray zone where it's technically allowed but nobody really ever does it, right? And even if it is technically legal to use two rackets in tennis, surely it can't actually make it any easier to play, right?

As far as that last point went, anyway, there was only one way to find out. I kicked off a rally against Chifuyu without questioning her dual-wielding tactic. And, the result?

"Ahh... Awaah!"

Chifuyu was totally incapable of managing the racket in her offhand. Not only that, she was off-balance enough that she couldn't use her first racket properly either. *Man, it's not every day that I see a punchline coming* that *far in advance!*

But, y'know, when all was said and done, I couldn't fault her for it. After all, I did basically the same thing back when I was in elementary school. I

totally tried to dual-wield in baseball and ping-pong. *Dual-wielding: hella cool.*

"Wh-Why isn't it working…?" asked Chifuyu, crestfallen at her inability to return so much as a single ball.

"You'll probably have more luck if you just use *one* racket, Chif—"

"Oh, I know!" Midway through my attempt at advice, Chifuyu's expression lit up. Apparently, she'd had a flash of inspiration. "How about *this*?" she said, spinning the rackets around in her hands. She ended up holding them upside-down compared to how one would normally wield a tennis racket. In other words…

"Underhand-grip dual-wielding?!" Is she planning on unleashing the Kaiten Kenbu Rokuren or something?! Has she been training herself in the legendary dual-shortsword techniques of the Oniwabanshu?!

"This means that just now…my power level *quadrupled*."

"How do those numbers check out at *all*?! The logic just *barely* squeaked by when you said it had doubled, but *nobody's* going to buy it this time!"

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Counterpoint, though: she kinda *looks super awesome?* Her backhanded dual-wielding stance gave Chifuyu the aura of a savage warrior striding out onto the battlefield. “Little girl” and “savage warrior” weren’t exactly terms that matched up naturally with each other, but in a weird sort of way, that actually gave it an air of *wrongness* that just helped the overall image.

Dammit, I can’t deny it! She really does *look super cool! I can’t let her outdo me like this!* Deep down inside me, a strange sort of competitiveness was beginning to burn bright. If I wanted to stand up against Chifuyu’s aura, I was gonna have to do it with *style*.

So what did I do? I chucked my racket over my shoulder, that’s what! It clattered to the ground outside the court’s boundaries, leaving me weaponless and defenseless. That was the only way I could possibly think to outdo her: taking on two weapons with zero! If she was gonna dual-wield, I’d just have to null-wield!

“I’m not gonna hit the ball with my racket,” I declared. “I’ll hit it with my *soul*!”

I let my hands fall loosely to my side and took up a perfectly relaxed stance as all the tension drained away from my body. It was an abstract, bladeless stance, specialized entirely in delivering the ultimate counterattack! My heart was at perfect peace, still and silent as the mirrorlike surface of an undisturbed lake. I had achieved true emptiness, the very state of vacancy that Buddhist monks aspire to. My body and soul were as one, melting away into the wind, each mighty gust carrying me leagues across the surface of the Earth.

Now, more than ever, I hear it. I hear the voice of the wind. The anime-esque voice of the wind.

“Interesting,” said Chifuyu, taking up her stance once more. “Come at me, Andou.”

Null-wielding vs. dual-wielding. Sparks flew between us as an air of tension descended over the court. It was as if we were two samurai, facing each other down with live blades and the steadfast dedication to claim our rival’s head. The air was thick, suffocatingly so, and a bead of cold sweat rolled down my cheek. Neither of us budged from our stance. Neither of us broke eye contact. Neither of us *blinked*.

The silence…was absolute. I almost felt like I could hear *both* of our heartbeats. This was a battlefield, and the slightest moment of complacency could very well prove fatal. That’s when a thought struck me.

So, uhh… What are we supposed to do now?

We’d gotten *into* this situation easily enough, but how exactly were we supposed to resolve it? Chifuyu’s hands were both full, so she couldn’t pull out a ball, much less serve it. So, what, was I supposed to just *throw* a ball into her side of the court? That *had* to be against the rules, right?

So then, would I have to abandon the stance I’d been holding? No way, right? Not after going *that* far to sell the scene! We were very obviously

building up to a “the first one to move loses” sort of climax, and I wasn’t going to give up on my chance at victory *that* easily!

Crap! At this rate, the battle’s never *going to start!* We just stood there, glaring at each other in complete silence for lack of anything more sensible we could accomplish. The only way we could’ve possibly justified this nonsense would be if we’d had somebody filling in the commentator role on the sidelines to explain that “*Actually*, they’re already fighting in an intense battle of visualization!”

I still had the same villainous grin plastered over my face, but inside, I was rapidly falling into a blind panic. Chifuyu, meanwhile, let out an intrepid chuckle.

“Andou,” she said, “I still have a secret weapon.”

“Y-You what?!” She hadn’t even used her *first* weapon, and she was already bringing out the secret one! Talk about extravagant! Chifuyu invoked *World Create* once again to deploy her so-called secret weapon.

“That makes four.”

“Four rackets, all wielded independently of each other?! Who are you, that one guy with the boomerang swords in the Trick Tower?!”

“And now six.”

“Six rackets, held in the gaps between your fingers?! What are you, a Sengoku-era samurai who shouts ‘Let’s party!’ all the time?!”

“And now ten.”

“Special gloves that let you wear a racket on each finger?! What are those, Captain Kuro’s Cat Claws?!”

“And now infinite.”

“A countless number of rackets raining down from the sky?! What is that, Gate of Babylon?!”

“And now from below.”

“A mountain of blades—I mean rackets—rising up from the ground?! What is that, Sword Mirage?!”

“And now...just one, after all.”

“Condensing all those rackets down into a single *ultimate* racket capable of shaking the very Earth with a single swing?! What is that, the White Emperor Sword?!”

And okay, wait a second! You have the ultimate power of Genesis on your side, so why’re you only using it to make more and more rackets?!

I paused for a moment to catch my breath, winded by the callout combo I’d just pulled off. Chifuyu, meanwhile, dematerialized her racket, mumbled “’M tired,” and trotted off the court.

“Huh? You’re done already, Chifuyu?” I asked, bewildered.

“Yeah. That was fun.”

“B-But, you haven’t even hit a ball yet!”

“Tennis can be fun even if you don’t hit anything,” she countered.

Was that deep of her? Or shallow? Probably shallow, right? Hmm... Well, whatever. If she says she had fun, then that’s all that matters. In any case,

those scant few minutes of banter were apparently enough to exhaust her stamina reserves. Chifuyu returned to the corner of the court and lay down again. The exchange had taken a lot out of me as well, to be fair, or at the very least, it had left me in a state of frozen incomprehension.

"It looks like that wasn't enough to satisfy you, Andou," said Sayumi as she strolled over to me. She must have picked up on my internal monologue or something. "I imagine you'll find me a much more worthwhile opponent. Let's play."

Sayumi's power, *Route of Origin*, was unique within our group in the sense that it was the only power that lacked any sort of direct offensive potential.

Yes, you heard me. The *only* one. I'm not budging on this point, no matter what anyone says. *Dark and Dark* has offensive potential, dammit! It's got *crazy* firepower when it has to, I swear!

But anyway, the point that I'm getting at here is that because *Route of Origin* didn't have anything to show for itself in terms of real offensive ability, I was hoping that it wouldn't prove all that useful on the tennis court. At the absolute least, I figured I wouldn't be subjected to the sort of out-there absurdist attacks that the other three were capable of.

I was underestimating her. I'd completely forgotten one simple fact: *Route of Origin* was far, *far* less scary than its wielder, Takanashi Sayumi herself.

"Oh my, Andou, are you finished already?"

There I was, on my knees in the middle of the court as Sayumi loomed over me, looking down upon me with the cruel, domineering smile of a tyrant-queen.

"C-Curses..." My chest heaved. I could barely breathe. My legs were made of pain. I couldn't even lift my arms anymore. The jacket I'd been wearing on my shoulders had fallen off at some point, and I didn't even know *where* it was.

Over the course of our roughly twenty-minute rally, I came to appreciate two things. First: Sayumi was *stupidly* good at tennis. Second: tennis is the sort of sport where a skilled player can inflict outright physical abuse upon a less-practiced opponent.

She sent me running from one end of the court to the other so many times I could barely tell left from right anymore, then she feinted a drop shot to the front of the court only to send me sprinting to the back again by turning it into a lob at the last second. The more I got a read on her movements, the more she used that fact to trick me. I legitimately lost count of how many times she made me trip over my own feet.

"Ugh... Give me a break, Sayumi!" I moaned. "Couldn't you, I don't know, be a little more *gentle* about it, at least? Like, maybe coach me instead of destroying me?"

“Whatever could you be talking about? I *have* been coaching you. I’ve hit every shot to a place you can return it from, haven’t I?”

She had a point, but on the other hand, that’s exactly what made it so excruciating. Every one of her shots was perfectly placed right at a distance I could just *barely* make it to at a full-on sprint. It wore me out in minutes, and then we didn’t stop. It was probably fantastic practice, in a certain sense of the word, but still! *Come on, I’m not even in the tennis club! I didn’t sign up to get put through some sort of twisted boot camp!*

“All right, it’s time. Please stand up, Andou. I’m not finished toying with —ahem, practicing with you,” said Sayumi with a positively joyful smile. She was in full-on sadist mode. However, as I staggered to my feet, trembling from fear just as much as exhaustion, the cruelty faded from her expression, replaced with a gentle, almost kindly air.

“Pull yourself together! You’re Guiltia Sin Jurai, aren’t you?”

“...Mwa ha ha!”

I laughed. All I could do was laugh—nay, *cachinnate*—with all the might I could muster! She had picked the most encouraging line she could’ve possibly come up with. There was nary a phrase in this world that could have lifted my spirits more!

“Then allow me to demonstrate my power,” I growled. “The power that’s earned me the title *Berserk of the Court*!”

So that ended predictably.

“Come on, Andou! I know you can run faster than that!”

“Bugwaugh!”

“All right, now the other side!”

“Mnaaah!”

“And now over here...or so you thought, but it was a feint!”

“Wha?! Agaaaugh!”

“He he he he he!”

Less than three minutes later, I found myself facedown on the court again.

“Oh my, oh my! Is that all the ‘*Berserk of the Court*’ has to offer?”

“Ugggh...”

This was hazing, plain and simple. Non-athletic clubs weren’t supposed to have these problems, but there I was, getting flagrantly bullied by an upperclassman anyway.

“Incidentally, not that it matters,” added Sayumi, “‘Berserk’ is only usable as a noun in Norwegian. If you were going for English—which I assume you were, given the use of the word ‘court’—you probably should have used ‘berserker’ instead. As in, *Berserker of the Court*. I believe it would come across as much more consistent that way.”

“Huh? Wait, you mean ‘berserk’ and ‘berserker’ mean the same thing in different languages?”

“Quite. ‘Berserk’ in Norwegian refers to a legendary group of warriors that feature prominently in Scandinavian mythology. ‘Berserker’ is the correct English rendition thereof, whereas ‘berserk’ is used as an adjective.”

Oh, huh! That was all news to me. I’d seen the word “berserk” get thrown around often enough that I sort of just assumed it was English for a warrior-barbarian, or whatever, but I had no idea that the roots and intricacies ran that deep.

“Are you telling me, Andou, that you put the word in one of your titles without even understanding its basic meaning?” asked Sayumi in an openly contemptuous tone.

Hellfire! First I get beaten to a pulp in tennis, and now she’s making a fool of me in my own field of obscure but cool vocabulary trivia?! This defeat couldn’t get any more absolute!

“Andou?” said Sayumi, smiling down upon me with the warmth of the sun itself as I lay prone on the ground, debilitated by pure humiliation.

“Pull yourself together. You’re Guiltia Sin Jurai, aren’t you?”

“Mwa ha…ha…haaah.”

I laughed. Well, I *started* to, but nope, couldn’t pull it off this time.

“Pull yourself together. You’re Guiltia Sin Jurai, aren’t you?”

“Umm…Sayumi? I think we’ve sorta gotten all the mileage out of the ‘somebody says that line and I find the strength to stand again’ pattern there is to get at this point.” I was up for it the first time, sure, but I have my limits, as does the principle of comedic repetition. A gag like that tends to wear real thin real quick if you abuse it.

“Oh, is that so? A shame. And here I thought that I’d discovered the secret codeword that let me work you like a plow horse whenever I felt like it.”

“Come to think of it, you *were* there when Tomoyo dropped that line, weren’t you?”

The time: a few days prior. The place: a path by the riverbed, bathed in the golden glow of the sunset. Tomoyo, smiling mischievously and giving my chest an encouraging tap with her fist. My heart had been on the verge of breaking, but she’d given me the support I needed to carry on.

“Yes, indeed. I was right there, directly next to you, and yet you and Tomoyo were off in your own little world, entirely oblivious to your surroundings. I’ll admit, it may have been ever so slightly irritating.”

“*Irritating*?! You mean the whole time that scene was playing out, you were standing right off to the side, fuming at us?!”

“So I thought that by invoking those words over and over for the sake of a cheap joke, I might be able to devalue the impact of that scene retroactively.”

“Wow! That’s simultaneously incredibly roundabout and incredibly petty of you!”

“I suppose you could say I was going for a bit of self-parody,” she added.

Self-parody, to put it simply, is the act of parodying your own work *within* your own work. Consider the movie *Enchanted*, for instance, in which Disney went out of their way to subvert all the tropes and genre-standard plot points of their own films. I *guess* Sayumi ripping off Tomoyo's words could be considered self-parody in a really broad sense of the term?

"I must admit, though, self-parody has proven to be considerably harder than I anticipated," Sayumi continued. "Frankly, it was much less funny than I was hoping it would be."

"If you're going to turn somebody's heartfelt words into a parody, you could at least have the decency to make sure the joke lands!"

"Considering you were the subject of the material I was parodying, Andou, I'm afraid that's your responsibility, not mine."

"People who screw up a parody then blame the source material are the *worst*!" I shouted, clenching my fists. "Performing a parody means staking two fates upon a single gag: yours and that of the source material you're parodying. Therein lies the comedy of parody, and should your joke fall flat, know too that the source material will fall with it! Thus, those who structure their jokes around parodies can never permit themselves to suffer defeat! This one believes you'd do well to engrave that truth upon your heart."

I felt somebody lightly karate-chop my head from behind. "You're not Kenshin, and the Swords that Give Life philosophy has *nothing* to do with parody ethics!"

I only knew one person capable of identifying a reference that quickly and calling it out that precisely. "Tomoyo!" I shouted, spinning around. She was standing right behind me, face flushed and already moving her gaze over to Sayumi.

"So, uhh," she stammered, "I'd really prefer it if you didn't use stuff I say for jokes like that, *especially* if you're gonna do it more than once." She was clearly incredibly embarrassed. Sayumi's appropriation of the line had apparently been even more humiliating to its original source than it was to its original target.

"He he he!" giggled Sayumi. "My apologies. I simply found myself ever so slightly envious of the deep understanding the two of you clearly shared."

"Wha?! I-It's not like I have an *understanding* with him, or—"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure you don't," said Sayumi with an obnoxiously mature chuckle as she strolled off the court, leaving me and Tomoyo to stand behind bewildered in her wake.

"Tomoyo?"

"Wh-What...?"

"I figure we should probably wrap this up soon, but how about we play one last round first?" I pressed a hand to my knee and finally managed to push myself to my feet again. I was near the limits of my endurance, but I couldn't just let it end there. I still had something left that I absolutely *had* to do.

“Fine by me…but what do you mean ‘a round’? Do you wanna hit the ball back and forth, or play a real match?”

“I want to practice special moves.”

“Hell no!”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Isn’t it obvious?! No *way* am I gonna play along with your stupid special move rehearsal session!”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m not gonna be doing anything *too* out-there. They’re special moves, sure, but keep in mind they’re only *tennis* special moves. I’m just talking about hitting a killer serve or two, that’s all.”

“Really…?” said Tomoyo, giving me a skeptical glance. “I mean, if that’s *really* all you want to do… Just to be safe, though, what *exactly* is the special move you want to try?”

“It’s called Dark Dreams Dispersed by the Midnight Sun: Retribution.”

“We haven’t even gotten past the name, and it’s already *ridiculously* out-there!”

“Mwa ha ha! It would seem the thought of my special move has you trembling in your boots!”

“If anything has me trembling, it’s the terrifying depths of your shamelessness… So, what sort of technique is *that*? The name doesn’t tell me anything about what it actually does.”

“First, I split through the fabric of space with my racket—”

“Stop. Don’t care anymore.”

“Hey, c’mon! I was just getting started!”

“Why would you *open* with something that’s beyond the realm of human possibility?! I’ve heard of difficult moves, but this is just absurd!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! The first move’s the only hard part.”

“Y’know what? Fine. Keep talking. Let’s hear it.”

“Okay, so I split the fabric of space with my racket, and next I use it to rend through darkness itself.”

“That’s *exactly* as stupidly impossible as the first part!”

“Then I go on to shred light itself into oblivion.”

“You’ve destroyed space, darkness, and light at this point! What else is even left for you to attack next?!”

“Next, I cut down my own worries and anxiety.”

“And now we’re going psychological?! Do that part *before* the match starts!”

“Then I deem my opponent God-damned.”

“Aren’t you just swearing at them?!”

“Then I damn God.”

“You’re *damning God*? All for the sake of a play on words?!”

“And then, finally, I cut down my opponent.”

“You’re just killing them?! Directly?! With your racket?! *Why*?! This is supposed to be *tennis*, for crying out loud! You could hit the ball at least *once*!”

“And then, while I’m wide open from my last strike…I cut myself down as well!”

“It’s a suicide attack?! You die at the end too?! For your own special move?!”

“That’s all! The end.”

“Yeah, to the move *and* your existence! What sort of tennis match ends with both players dead on the court?!”

“There’s no such thing as conflict without sacrifice, y’know?”

“Have you even *heard* of sportsmanship?! And wait, back up. You killed *yourself* off at the end, there! You’re just *okay* with that?!”

“Those who kill unwittingly slay *themselves* with every blow struck. Covered in wounds, bathed in blood, doomed to fall to the depths of Hell and rot in its deepest pits…such is their fate, and such is the fate that this technique of ultimate assassination, Dark Dreams Dispersed by the Midnight Sun: Retribution, was meant to embody!”

“You seriously expect me to believe there’s that deep of a backstory behind it?!”

“Though *really*, in the end, it all turns out to have been an illusion, and we’re actually still facing each other down with rackets at the ready.”

“You did *not* just it-was-all-a-dream this!”

“C’mon, techniques that turn out to be illusions are super handy! You can do *anything* to *any* character and get away with it just fine that way!”

“That’s…kinda true, I guess. Illusion techniques *are* sort of cheating, in a sense.”

“All right, then!” I’d spent a satisfactory amount of time extolling the virtues of my special move and paused to stretch. “Now that I’ve explained the details of my most ultimate of secret moves…let’s undo the self-imposed *Prince of Tennis* ban and practice all the special moves from that series we can think of, shall we?”

“After *all that*, we’re going back to *Prince of Tennis* in the end?!”

“Hey, whoa, cut me some slack! I wasn’t kidding around that time. I’m totally serious.”

“What? Like…what? You’re…serious?” Tomoyo babbled, utterly bewildered.

I smirked. “That’s right. *Totally* serious.”

You know you’ve found a good special move when it makes you want to imitate it. Not only is that a sign the move’s solid, it’s also one of the central appeals of shonen manga. That’s what the genre’s all about: giving hopes and dreams to the children who read it.

I can’t even begin to guess how much time I spent practicing special moves when I was a kid. There was the one time I broke my mom’s umbrella trying to do an Avan Strash and she got *super* mad at me, and the time I sprained a finger really badly trying to do the Eight Trigrams Sixty-Four Palms taijutsu, and the time I actually fractured my hand trying to pull off a

Futae no Kiwami, and the time I lost three baby teeth at once trying to imitate the Three-Sword Style… Anyway, they're all just good memories now. Or, well, painful memories, really.

And that's not all. Battle manga aren't the only ones that have special moves in them. Hot-blooded sports manga are absolutely full of the things, and some of those get *really* wild. I'm talking way beyond the limits of what a middle or high schooler could pull off—the sort of special move that makes you want to shout "Oh, come *on*, if they can do *that* when they're still in school, what sort of moves are they gonna be able to pull off when they're a pro playing on a world-class level?!" Though of course, that's the sort of backwards perspective on those moves that only an adult would take.

Is it possible to pull those moves off in real life? Do they have a logical, reasonable explanation behind how they work? Those matters play second and third fiddle, respectively, to the *real* question: does seeing them set your soul aflame? If a special move can pull *that* off, then that's all that really matters.

And so, I poured my all into pretending to do special moves. Now, to be clear, I'm *usually* not pretending at all! Those are *simulations*. Totally different. But in that moment, for once, I just wanted to play make-believe. The most intense, devoted, fun-as-hell game of make-believe ever played. I knew, somewhere off in a dusty corner of my mind, that all those special moves were impossible, but still…still, I couldn't help but want to practice some of them anyway.

"*Man*, that was fun!" I exclaimed. I'd done it. I'd run through every special move I wanted to practice.

Tomoyo rolled her eyes with a strained smile. "Feels like you had way more fun with this than you did playing actual tennis, huh?" she commented sarcastically.

"Hmm, you think? Ha ha, yeah, you might be right about that." I walked over to her as I spoke and borrowed her racket, holding it and mine in either hand.

"What, you're dual-wielding now?" she asked.

"That's right! Like Chifuyu did a while back, y'know? I used to try and dual-wield stuff all the time way back whenever, so seeing her like that took me on a real nostalgia trip."

"Yeah, there's one in every class. Somebody *always* gets it in their head to dual-wield whenever you play a sport with rackets or bats or whatever."

As we chatted, the other three walked across the court toward us. Hatoko looked down at my rackets, then jumped into the conversation as well.

"Now that you mention it, I remember you dual-wielding stuff all the time back then! Like the time in gym class when you put baseball gloves on both your hands, remember? You walked out into the center of the field and shouted something like 'Now the area I can defend has doubled!'"

“Oh, I see this punchline coming a mile away,” sighed Tomoyo. “He ended up catching the ball, only to realize that he couldn’t throw it, right?”

“Nope! We were playing soccer that day.”

“I did *not* see that punchline coming!” shouted Tomoyo, recoiling with shock.

Yeaaah, man, that really was embarrassing. We swapped sports in gym class on a monthly basis, and I’d totally spaced on the fact that it was the first of a new month.

“But why *did* you always love dual-wielding like that, Juu?” asked Hatoko.

“Why? Well... I mean...” Huh? Why was I so into dual-wielding? When I really think about it, I’m not actually sure! I mean, the obvious answer would be because it’s cool...but that begs the question: why did I think it was so cool? Was I really into a manga with a character who dual-wielded at the time or something?

“I believe the explanation behind Andou’s interest in dual-wielding is simple,” said Sayumi. “He did it because other people *weren’t* doing it, don’t you think?”

“Huh? What does that mean?” I asked, cocking my head in confusion.

“It means that you wanted to be unique, that’s all. Dual-wielding in and of itself wasn’t especially meaningful for you—the fact that you would be the only person doing it is where the true appeal lay. If, hypothetically, there were a form of tennis where using two rackets was standard practice, I imagine that you wouldn’t have chosen to do so. Am I wrong?”

I couldn’t answer, because honestly, there was a real chance she *wasn’t* wrong. When Chifuyu decided to dual-wield, she did it because she thought it would make her stronger, but I hadn’t given my power level a second thought when I’d done it. No, I was purely motivated by a desire to be cool.

“So basically, this is another ‘I’m not like everyone else, and that makes me awesome!’ moment?”

“Tomoyooo,” I groaned, “you didn’t have to sum it up that easily!”

“What? I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Ugh...”

Once again, I was left clenching my teeth without a rebuttal. It was only when somebody else pointed it out to me that I finally realized: my lifelong love for dual-wielding might very well have arisen from the fact that dual-wielders were overwhelmingly in the minority in almost all fields.

Doing something that nobody else does...is cool.

Doing something that nobody else *can* do...is cool.

“Y’know,” I mumbled, “maybe that has something to do with why special moves are so great too.”

“How’s that?” asked Tomoyo.

“I mean, maybe the fact that not just anyone can pull them off is part of what makes special moves so cool.”

I don't think that's *all* there is to them, of course, but I certainly can't rule it out as being a factor in their ever-present charm. Special moves give you the irrepressible urge to imitate them precisely *because* they can't be imitated. Having a move that only you can do, having a move that only the chosen one can pull off, is what makes that move special—and by extension, cool—in the first place.

"Yes, I see. There's a certain logic to that," said Sayumi with a nod. She sounded almost impressed. "Adolescence is, after all, a period of intense emotional instability. It's also a period in which one's personal identity goes through a considerable degree of development, and the impulse to be aggressively individualistic—the 'I'm not like everyone else, and that makes me awesome' chuuni impulse, as it were—likely plays a factor in stoking those flames, in some cases. For social animals like humans, the knowledge that there's something you can do that nobody else is capable of is of unparalleled value. Ergo, I think it's very reasonable to conclude that the charm that special moves seem to hold for young boys in particular can be used as a point of reference to estimate one's degree of emotional development, and..."

I pretty much tuned out at that point. *Is she* trying *to make her argument in the most complicated way possible or is it by accident?* I wasn't following her train of thought at all, in either case, but I could more or less tell that she actually thought I'd made a point for once. It wasn't every day that the endlessly erudite and wickedly wise Sayumi told me that there was "a certain logic" to one of my ideas, after all. I could think of few things more confidence-inspiring than that.

"Mwa ha ha! It would seem I've gone and unveiled yet another fundamental truth of this world. Really, now, my train of thought is so uncontrollable, it even scares *me* sometimes!"

"But, Andou..." chimed in Tomoyo, "aren't there a ton of characters that copy people's special moves? It's a whole thing in battle manga *and* sports manga."

My train of thought ground to a screeching halt. *N-Now that she mentions it...*

"So, what's the deal? Doesn't that sorta throw a wrench in the whole 'they're cool because other people can't use them' theory?"

"Wh-Who cares?! Characters like that usually can't use their copied moves to their full potential and end up self-destructing anyway! Besides, most characters with copy abilities end up running into a move they can't copy no matter what they do eventually!"

"So, does that mean that the moves that *can* get copied aren't really that big of a deal?"

I didn't have an answer to that one either.

"Like, the Kamehameha's pretty much the most famous special move in Japan, and can't, like, half the characters in the series use it by the end?"

“I guess…special moves can be cool, even if they’re super easy for other people to use.”

“It would seem the theory has broken down at a basic level,” said Sayumi, her shoulder slumped in defeat. “Though of course, the whole theory was built on nothing but pure speculation in the first place.”

In the end, it turned out my theory was full of holes. Hmm… I guess when all’s said and done, the appeal of special moves isn’t something you can sum up that easily.

Man… Special moves are hella deep.

Chapter 3: Andou&!

When I arrived at the club room after school, I found Tomoyo alone inside. Her eyes were glued to her laptop's screen, so I decided to let her know I was there.

"Hey."

"Ah, hi...huh?" Tomoyo looked over as she returned my greeting, then immediately furrowed her brow in a skeptical grimace as her gaze drifted over my shoulder.

Mwa ha ha! Looks like she's noticed already! I barely resisted the urge to break down in a fit of maniacal laughter as I did my best to pretend I *hadn't* noticed her stare and nonchalantly sat down in my usual chair. Then I shrugged the crimson coffin—the sarcophagal reliquary within which my very soul slumbered—off my shoulders and onto the table. Yea, that casket the color of fresh-spilled blood...otherwise known as a guitar case.

"*Boy*, was that ever heavy!" I declared theatrically, making a big show of stretching out my shoulders and surreptitiously watching Tomoyo to see how she reacted. She'd gone right back to her computer, though, and wasn't looking at me at all.

"Man, oh *man*, my shoulders are *stiff*! Really wears you out, carrying something you *don't usually bring to school*!"

Glance.

"Think I might've stood out juuust a little on the way to class, huh? Man, I wish people'd just mind their own business! Not like we musicians play our songs for *attention* or anything, y'know?"

Glance.

"Though, when I think about it... What *is* music, really? Maybe the answer lies in the question? Maybe that eternal conundrum is what draws people to music in the first place, what makes it resonate in their hearts?"

Glance.

"Yeah, I get it now... How foolish I was to even try to explain it in the first place! *True* musicians are always inarticulate. It's just the way things are. If an idea can be expressed in words, then why bother expressing it at all?"

"Oh my *god*, would you *please* just shut up already?!" shouted Tomoyo, finally driven to the point that she *had* to react somehow. A second later, though, she realized what she'd done and scowled with regret. "Crap... I *knew* you'd just get even more annoying if I said anything, so I thought I'd just ignore you, but you were just being so obnoxious I couldn't let it slide no matter how hard I tried..."

Tomoyo sighed, then looked back up at me. "So, out with it. What's with the guitar, Andou?"

"*Huuuh*? Oh, you mean *this* guitar? Guess people just can't help but notice, huh? Carrying one of these around's rough sometimes—you *always*

end up being the center of attention, like it or not! Maaan, I sure wish I could just fade into the background sometimes!" I said with an incredibly self-satisfied smirk.

"Oh, *god*, spare me... See, this is *exactly* why I was ignoring you in the first place," groaned Tomoyo. "What, did you buy that thing?"

"Yup! Sure did."

"Why?"

"Why indeed? Perhaps it was fate—when I saw it at the shop yesterday, I fell for it at a glance. This guitar was calling for me. I *felt* its voice; I felt it in my bones! 'You're the one,' it said!" I stroked the case lovingly as I spoke.

Telling the whole and complete story's probably going to take a while, so buckle up! It all started the day before when I went to a local thrift store. I was looking for used books, but then I found the guitar and bought it right then and there.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't that long of a story after all. Wait, back up a second! This is making me look like some sort of impulse shopper or something!

"Lemme guess," said Tomoyo. "You were thinking 'I bet if I carry a guitar to school, everyone's gonna give me a ton of attention and think I'm hella cool!' or something along those lines. Right?"

"H-Huh?! Uh, sorry, *what*? I, like, don't get what you're trying to say here!"

Tomoyo glared at me, and I broke eye contact. No way, I wasn't thinking that at all! I definitely didn't go out of my way to walk through the third and first years' floors on my way here either!

"And anyway, can you even play the guitar, Andou?"

"Heh! Do you know what they call questions like that, Tomoyo? *Foolish* questions!"

"Sure they do. Okay, then, new question: do you have all the chords memorized yet?"

"Chords? What're those?" I asked reflexively.

"The little dumbass bought a guitar without even knowing what chords are," mumbled Tomoyo, sighing deeply once again. That was enough to clue me in to the fact that whatever "chords" were, they were apparently something that a guitarist would know about. I had a feeling that the further I dug myself into the music-theory pit, the more my story was going to fall to pieces, so I decided to do what I did best: change the topic!

"Mwa ha ha! You still have a lot to learn about the world, Tomoyo. You look at a guitar case and assume that there *has* to be a guitar inside... All I can say is that you severely want for imagination."

"*Excuse* me? What else would be in there?"

"An assault rifle, for all you know."

"As if! Maybe if this were a movie or a manga, but not in real life!"

"It's also totally possible I'm using it to store a holy sword or a blessed lance."

“No, it isn’t!”

In manga and anime, having a character who operates in the underworld hide their weapon in a guitar case when they have to move around in the light of day is super standard stuff. That way, they can pop open the case and whip out some super cool weapon when a crisis arises—or maybe it turns out the guitar case itself *is* the weapon! That’s even cooler!

“Admit it, Tomoyo. When you see someone walking around with a guitar case, part of you totally thinks ‘Is that a guitar in there, or is it *really*...?’ right?”

“I’m not a delusional creeper, so no! You’re literally the only one who thinks like that!”

“Oof, I dunno, sounds like you’re putting yourself at risk to me! You’ll be totally helpless if worse ever *does* come to worst! That’s why I always make sure to keep my distance and stay on guard whenever I see someone walking around with a guitar case.”

“Your fantasies are running *way* out of control! Nobody carries anything other than guitars in guitar cases in the real world! That’s what you have in yours, isn’t it?!”

“No way to know for sure unless I open it, right? Listen up, Tomoyo: objective reality can only be determined by way of observation. In other words, so long as something hasn’t been observed, it cannot be conclusively stated to be one thing or another! By logical extension, since there *could* be a guitar in this case and there *could* be a weapon, the truth of the matter is that *both* outcomes exist simultaneously in a superimposed—”

“Of *course* you’d go there! Wouldn’t be a conversation with a chuuni if they didn’t drop Schrödinger’s cat in somewhere along the way!” said Tomoyo with a mighty roll of her eyes.

I fell silent midsentence. Oh, she didn’t! How dare she ridicule Schrödinger’s cat? Doesn’t she know that Schrödinger was, umm...famous for, err...I dunno exactly what, but I’m pretty sure he was famous for something super awesome!

“Seriously,” she continued, “would you get it through your head already that the weapons in guitar cases thing is totally fictional?”

“Oh, but you *still* have a lot to learn about the world, Tomoyo!” I countered. “We live in a reality rife with war and devastation, and just because a guitar case has a guitar inside of it doesn’t mean you can just sit back and rest easy!”

“And why would *that* be?”

“Because people who carry around guitars...could very well be Martial Maestros!”

Tomoyo took a deep breath. “*Martial Maestros*?”

Allow me to explain! The Martial Maestro is a character archetype that turns up all the time in supernatural battle stories. Simply put, they’re characters who fight by wielding the power of music! They play the guitar

or flute or whatever to mind-control their enemies, or they attack with literal, physical sound waves, or something along those lines.

"That's right—Martial Maestros! They crop up here and there; you know how this stuff works." Tomoyo, being the mega-nerd she was, would surely pick up on what I was trying to say with the bare minimum amount of explanation required. I never had to go all out on the exposition when I was talking to her. "To put it simply, they're the sort of characters who say stuff like 'Now, perk up your ears as I play the requiem of your demise!'"

"I really hate how much sense that made to me," Tomoyo grumbled. Then she seemed to realize something and shifted the topic slightly. "Hey, Andou? Do you know a lot of that sorta music terminology? Like requiem, and prelude, and stuff?"

"Do you even have to ask? Prelude, solo, duo, concerto, sinfonia, waltz, sonata, rhapsody, fantasia, serenade, oratorio, capriccio, tondo, nocturne, requiem—"

"Oh, god, stop! I get the point! Why do you know *that much* music jargon?!"

Well, I mean, it's super cool! Music vocab just sorta sounds awesome; what more do you want from me? Like, Atobe's special moves are the friggin' best! Music jargon: hella cool!

"Not that I have any clue whatsoever what any of them *mean*, of course," I admitted.

"It's actually almost refreshing how openly superficial you are about this sort of thing," replied Tomoyo with an air of absolute exasperation. "You really do *just* memorize words you think sound cool. That's just...so, *so* chuuni it hurts."

Just then, a thought struck me. "Hey, Tomoyo, let's play a game! Y'know that one where you take turns coming up with words that fit into a certain category, and whoever slips up first loses? Let's do that, but the category's 'things that a Martial Maestro in a supernatural battle story would probably say'!"

"Ugh, no way. Not happening."

"C'mon, it'll be fine! I know you can pull it off! Believe in yourself! And you *gotta* admit it sounds sorta fun, right?"

Tomoyo pursed her lips and glanced away awkwardly. "W-Well, okay, but just for a little!"

And with that, it was *on*.

"Here we go!" I kicked us off. "'The typical human ear can perceive sounds ranging from twenty to twenty thousand hertz. But *my* ears are different—*I* can hear a range of sound utterly imperceptible to you average Joes!'"

"Going with the 'my ears are as good as a dog's' archetype, huh? Okay, uhh—'My ultra-high frequency sound waves don't *just* damage your eardrums! They pierce all the way into your semicircular canals! Heh heh

heh…you can feel it already, can't you? Feel the world begin to distort around you!'"

"Ooh, the semicircular canals! Taking out their sense of balance! That's a classic for sound-based attacks, for sure. My turn! 'Every form of matter has a distinctive frequency…and sound is nothing more than the vibration of the air! That means that by emitting the same frequency as an object, I can cause it to destructively resonate with the air around it, disintegrating it on a molecular level from the inside out!'"

"Sound-wave attacks? That's another staple. 'Anyone who hears my music falls under my spell, and is instantly turned into a mindless puppet that obeys my every command!'"

"I see what you did there—music-based psychological attacks! Always a nice way to make one of the good guys swap teams and stir up some drama. 'Seventy percent of the human body is made up of water. Now, tell me…what do you think would happen if I were to use my music to send some *ripples* through all that water inside of you?'"

"Sound and water. Always a solid combo, for sure. Okay, then '*Fool*! Water is several orders of magnitude denser than air, and that means that sound travels faster and farther through it! I'm sure you think you've escaped from my domain, but all you've done is charged headfirst into your own demise!'"

"Ooh, the 'you think you can get away from me' pattern? 'Ugh… He's a Martial Maestro, so I'm sure he'll understand this message. It'll take the last ounce of my power…but I'll send it to him…in Morse code…'"

"A message that only a Martial Maestro would understand, huh…? Hmm? Wait a second—that's not really something a Martial Maestro would say, is it? That's something that one of a Martial Maestro's *teammates* would say, right?"

I paused.

"Oh."

Crap! I totally slipped up! I had, like, a billion good lines left in stock too!

"And, that's game. I win! Wasn't even *trying*, really, but cool, I guess," Tomoyo declared with a triumphant smirk. "Heh heh! Gotta say, it *does* feel pretty good getting to totally grind someone into the dirt like that."

"G-Grr," I growled in incoherent, wordless frustration. Not that there was anything I could've said in protest to begin with. I'd made a careless mistake, and there was no debating the point. A crushing sense of shame threatened to smash my heart to pieces. Had I *really* just lost a game that I, myself, had come up with?

"I suppose I have no choice," I muttered at last. " As promised, I shall relinquish to you one of my titles: the Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel!"

"When the hell did you promise that?! And keep it! I don't want it! It's *awful*!"

"Oh, my heart…oh, how it breaks!"

“Then take it back!”

“I refuse! God might forgive such transgressions, but my pride would never suffer them!”

“I’m *done*, I swear…”

“I’m certain that Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel will serve you well, as long as you take care of it. Shouting it at the top of your lungs once every three days or so should do the trick.”

“Hell no!”

“Incidentally, the ‘Tidings’ part’s meant to evoke both literal tidings *and* the turning of the tide, which links up thematically with the ‘moonlit’ part. Try to keep that in mind when you shout it.”

“Of *course* it would be needlessly elaborate!”

Hey, don’t call it needless! Not to toot my own horn or anything, but I happen to think it’s a pretty darn solid title. If I had to pick out one aspect I like best about it, it would definitely have to be the use of the word ‘evangel.’ It’s just such a good word! I have no idea what it means, but seriously, it’s just great! Evangels: hella cool.

“I guess it’s not *my* title anymore, though…Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel,” I murmured wistfully to myself, just to hear how it sounded.

“I *said* you could have it back, dammit!”

“Tomoyo…” I pleadingly moaned with all the sincerity I could muster, ignoring pretty much everything she was actually saying to me. “If nothing else, please, grant me this one final request: I want to hear your title, the title that *used* to be mine, Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel. I want to hear you declare it yours, as loud as possible. If you do, then I think…I’ll finally be able to move on.”

“No!” shouted Tomoyo, turning me down as bluntly as possible. To be completely honest, I didn’t *really* care one way or the other. I just thought it’d be really funny if I could actually convince her to shout out one of my titles at the top of her lungs, so I decided to stick to it a little longer.

All right! Time to initiate Operation Butter Her Up! “You know, Tomoyo…you have a really nice voice.”

“H-Huh?!” Tomoyo sputtered. “Where did *that* come from…?”

“I’d go so far as to say that if you’d been born in a less peaceful era, you could’ve ended wars with your singing voice alone!”

“Th-That can’t *possibly* be true…”

“And you know, that’s why you’re worthy of the title Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel. Your voice is akin to that of a goddess’s.”

“Oh, *stop*… If you *really* think my voice is that nice, then I guess I could *still say no, loser*! Did you *seriously* think you could get away with flattering me that blatantly?!”

Oof. Rejected again, and with a fake-out to boot. Guess my plan was a little too transparent. I was out of ideas, so I figured I’d just have to give up and call it a day…but then Tomoyo sighed.

"*Fine*, I don't even care anymore. Turning you down over and over's more of a pain than just doing it," she said, then stood up, sighed, and started droning in a listless monotone, "I am she who they call the Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel. *There*. Are you happy now?"

Now it was my turn to sigh, and let me tell you, my sigh put every sigh she'd sighed up to that point to shame.

"Wh-What...?" asked Tomoyo.

"I dunno, it's just...something about the way you were so obviously doing it begrudgingly, then got all snappy and self-important when you finished... I guess it was kind of a letdown."

"A *what*?" Tomoyo snapped disbelievingly. "*You're* the one who kept telling me to say it, weren't you?"

"I did, yeah, but what kind of person would be satisfied just because they *technically* got their way? The working world always expects people to go the extra mile when it comes to stuff like this, y'know? I *know* you can do better than that, and I was all excited for you to put on a real high-quality performance."

"I think the fact that the performance was me saying a title takes 'high-quality' off the table by default."

"Right, right, I get it! You were right, I was wrong, and I'm sorry. You're a big, grown-up high schooler, after all! Keeping up appearances is really important for people like you, right? That's why you always act like you're oh-so mature and make fun of me for being a chuuni, right? You're like one of those snobs who doesn't wanna do anything to improve society themself, but just *loves* ranting on and on about how their least favorite politicians are ruining the country. I *get* it."

Tomoyo let out an indignant little grunt.

"I was an idiot for expecting anything from you, and that's all there is to it," I closed, punctuating the end of my spiel with a sigh.

"Oh... Oh, it's friggin' *on*," shouted Tomoyo. She'd finally well and truly snapped. "*Fine*! You want me to say it that badly? Then I'll do it! Oh, will I *ever* do it! I'm going *all out* on your ass, so don't get scared and go crying home to mommy halfway through!"

I just sat there and kept my expression in a deadpan. *Man, Tomoyo's* really *easy to provoke, huh?* I pondered as, driven by pure, unbridled fury, she actually climbed up *onto* her chair. Tomoyo glared down at me from on high, then grinned, her mouth twisting into the merciless sneer of an evil overlord.

"O blades, let resound your cacophonous melody! O beasts, let ring your moon-rending howls! Let war upon war form the chains that bind this world; let the victors sob with delight and the defeated wail in lamentation!"

Tomoyo raised her right hand aloft, and then her left, gesticulating like a trained actress as her soliloquy rose to a crescendo. Then, suddenly, she whipped her hands through the air, crossing her arms in her trademark pose.

Still atop the chair, by the way.

"The din and screams that wash over this world all fall under my domain! I am she who they call the Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel! Now, in these fleeting moments before your miserable demise, I shall let sound your final requiem!"

Her astonishingly long speech finished, Tomoyo paused, a look of relieved satisfaction crossing her face. It soon morphed into a smug, triumphant grin as she turned her gaze back down to me, though. And, yeah, it was perfect. A real 120/100 performance. I could practically see the words 'Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel' materialize in big block letters around her. The quality level that time was through the *roof*. There was, however, one tiny little detail that I figured she probably hadn't noticed.

That being the fact that two of our tardy clubmates were standing in the doorway, gobsmacked expressions of incomprehension on their faces.

"T-Tomoyo…?" called Hatoko, more than a little nervously.

Tomoyo jerked backwards so violently that she *almost* fell right off her chair, but then she just barely managed to regain her balance and step down, very slowly, on her own. "H-Hatoko," she quietly stammered, face white as a sheet. "And Sayumi too… H-How long have you been standing there?"

"Umm," said Hatoko, "since the part where you said 'O blades,' or so…"

"N-No, no no no! It's not, n-n-no, this isn't, no!"

"Tomoyo…"

"Look away!" shouted Sayumi as she clamped her hands over Hatoko's eyes. "Hatoko? Listen to me. We saw *nothing*. We did *not* witness Tomoyo standing atop a chair, posing and reciting some sort of bizarre, intensely cringe-inducing monologue."

"B-But..."

"Hatoko. Please. We'll be doing her a kindness."

"Oh… Yeah, okay, I understand." Hatoko gave Sayumi a big nod, then smiled stiffly as she turned back to Tomoyo. "I didn't see anything at all, Tomoyo! And, uhh…I-I'll still be your friend, no matter what!"

"N-No, Hatoko, this is all a misunderstanding! H-Hey, Andou, back me up here!" Tomoyo desperately cried.

I hesitated for just a moment, then recoiled, feigning astonishment. "Tomoyo…? What're you *talking* about? You just started shouting all that random stuff out of nowhere—what's *wrong* with you…?"

"Andou?!" shrieked Tomoyo, looking for all the world like I'd just stabbed her in the back. Which, to be fair, I sort of had. And yeah, I felt a *little* guilty about it, but I was having way too much fun teasing her to let that stop me.

“Seriously, that scared me half to death,” I continued. “One second she was just sitting there, typing away at her laptop, and the next she was standing on her chair, ranting about who even *knows* what.”

“W-Wait! You *told* me to do that, didn’t you?! You *insisted* I call myself Tidings of the Moonlit Evangel!”

“Th-The Moonlit…Evan…huh? Uhh, sorry, the *what*? This is all Greek to me. Is that, like, some special move you came up with?”

“O-Oh, you little! Th-This is all your fault, and you know it!”

“My fault…? Yeah. Yeah, I guess you’re right. I was with you this whole time, but I never noticed how far your mental health had deteriorated. I should’ve been there for you, so maybe I *am* responsible for your stress outburst… I’m so sorry, Tomoyo…”

“Stop twisting this against me! That’s not what you should be apologizing for!”

While Tomoyo and I were verbally sparring, Hatoko and Sayumi’s faces went more and more pallid. The pity and compassion in their gazes grew deeper with each passing second.

“S-Seriously, Hatoko, Sayumi, this isn’t what you think it is! Please, stop looking at me like that,” Tomoyo desperately begged as tears began to well up in her eyes. At that point, her panic finally got the better of her, and she started stammering incoherently, glancing all around the room in search of *anything* that could help her escape from the situation.

Before long, though, her eyes settled upon the root of all evil, the fiend who had put her in this position in the first place. That is to say, me. In an instant, the panic in her eyes was replaced with a sparkle of pointed, concentrated malice.

Ohh crap. Those are the eyes of a girl who’s seriously *snapped this time. That’s a look that tells you a supernatural battle could break out at literally any second.* Just when I was starting to reflect on my actions and conclude I’d gone maybe just a little too far, though, Tomoyo vanished…and in that same split second, a veritable storm of books materialized right in front of me.

Actually, no, that’s not quite right. The books weren’t just in front of me—they were in front of me and also flying *at* me, at high velocity. It could only be *Closed Clock* at work: Tomoyo had stopped time, walked over to the bookshelf in front of me, and thrown all the books in it at my face, one after the other. The second she released her power, they would all sail toward me at once.

Mwa ha ha! She went to quite the effort to set this attack up, but I’ve seen through her schemes! Which, unfortunately, wasn’t to say I could actually *do* anything about it. Predicting an attack is one thing, but *dodging* it is an entirely different can of worms.

“Gahaaaugh!” I screamed as more books than I could count slammed directly into me, knocking me clean off my chair. I rolled around on the floor in relatively minor—but nonetheless distressing—agony until I happened to

roll right into somebody's foot, headfirst. I looked up, only to find Tomoyo looking right back down at me. She was *definitely* still upset.

"Hmph! Serves you right!" said Tomoyo, crossing her arms and looking away in a huff.

"…"

"What? You got what you deserved, and you know it, so don't you dare complain about this."

"…"

"S-Say *something*, come on…"

"Umm…" I cleared my throat. "I can s-see up your skirt."

Tomoyo let out a strangled screech. Then she stepped on my head. I might've enjoyed having a girl step on me if I were a masochist, but seeing as I'm not, it just plain old hurt.

"So, in short, the source of this whole sordid affair was the guitar case that Andou randomly brought to school today," summarized Sayumi after we'd finished explaining the entire sequence of events. "Would you mind if I took a look at the guitar in question, Andou?"

"Sure, go ahead," I answered, opening up the case. The four of us crowded around the table to look inside. Stored within was a truly stunning guitar, colored a vivid mixture of red and black. And oh, was it ever cool. My guitar was *hella* cool.

"Ooof. Yeah, I can see *exactly* why those colors caught your eye," said Tomoyo with a dispiriting cringe. *So? Nobody asked you! I like what I like!*

"I believe this would be a Mustang," murmured Sayumi as she inspected the guitar.

I gave her a puzzled stare. "A Mustang? Like Roy? Y'know, from *FMA*?"

"Not that one. I'm referring to Mustang, the guitar brand. The proper English pronunciation *is* the same as that character's name, but Japanese people tend to pronounce the brand's name with more of an extended 'mu' sound. Look, see the logo here? That's 'Mustang' in English. This is one of Fender Japan's guitars, no question about it."

"Oh, is it?" I said, honestly impressed by how well she knew her stuff.

"Andou, did you buy this guitar without even knowing the first thing about its brand?" asked Sayumi, her exasperation very apparent in her tone.

"Well, I mean, y'know what they say: a true craftsman can produce a masterpiece no matter what tools they're using! When you get to my level, you don't really fuss over stuff like the *brand* of your guitar. Besides, you don't play music with an instrument, you play it with your soul!"

"He he he! You are, as always, wholeheartedly obnoxious," tittered Sayumi, insulting me viciously with a perfectly genuine smile. She'd always been really good at that.

"So, wait—pronunciation-wise, does that make my guitar the fusion of Colonel Muska and Colonel Roy Mustang? Is my guitar the ultimate colonel?!"

“No,” said Sayumi, bluntly refusing to play along with what *I* thought was a really good joke. Instead, she went back to explaining the particulars of my guitar. “The Mustang brand is known for its short scale and relatively small body plus its punchy, treble-heavy tone. It’s a historically popular model that remains well-loved to this day. That said, it’s also known for easily falling out of tune, and is often described as a guitar not suited to beginners.”

I fell silent, largely on account of the fact that I understood *almost* nothing she’d just told me. For reference, my guitar expertise was at the level where I knew that a guitar and a bass were different things, but didn’t *really* understand how or why. Sayumi’s explanation went in one ear and out the other.

“Hey, Juu,” said Hatoko, breaking into the pause in the conversation. “Can I try holding it?”

“I dunno… You’re not gonna break it, right?”

“I won’t, I won’t! It’ll be fine!” I reluctantly passed Hatoko the guitar, and she happily slung its strap over her shoulder. “Ta-da! Well? How do I look? Like a real guitarist?”

Hmm. Surprisingly enough, she actually sorta did. I had to admit, it was a good look for her. That proved to me that pretty much anyone could look good with a guitar in their hands, at least to some extent.

“Huh?” said Hatoko as she plucked at the strings. “That’s weird, though. It’s not making any sound…”

“Yeah, ’cause it’s an electric,” Tomoyo chimed in. “You have to plug it into an amp to play it.”

“What’s an amp?” I asked, only for Tomoyo to give me one of the most disbelieving looks I’d seen from her all day. “Wh-What? Why’re you looking at me like I’m some sorta caveman?”

“I can understand why Hatoko wouldn’t know this, but *you* literally own an electric guitar! How could you *possibly* not know what an amp is?”

“Huh? Wait, are they really that important?”

“Super important. An amp’s like a speaker, basically. You’ve seen those black boxes that’re always up on stage near guitarists, right? Those are amps, and you literally can’t play an electric guitar without one.”

“What?! Seriously?!” I cried out in shock and horror. “Damnations! That clerk pulled a fast one on me! Can’t believe they’d take me for a ride like this just because I’m a beginner!”

“Just for reference, did you, y’know, *tell* them you’re a beginner?” asked Tomoyo.

“Huh? You seriously think I’d do something that humiliating?” I replied. “I went in with a look in my eyes that told the clerk I’d learned to hold a pick before I started sucking a pacifier! I had my rock star aura turned up to eleven when I bought this thing!”

“Then it’s your own damn fault!” Tomoyo snapped.

Yeah, okay. When you put it that way, I guess I am totally in the wrong here. Probably should've asked that clerk a question or two, huh?

"I get it now, though. Gotta buy an amp if I wanna play the guitar... Ah, but now that I think about it, I actually *have* heard about amps before!" I exclaimed. An amp-related piece of trivia had finally bubbled up from the depths of my memory. "There's that bit in *Soul Eater* where they say that a Meister and their Weapon work like an electric guitar and its amp! Okay, it all makes sense now!"

"Of all the ways for you to contextualize this for yourself, I swear!"

"Anyway, I'll just have to go back to the store after school and pick up an amp! After that, all I'll have left to do before I can play my guitar is—"

"So, *so* much stuff! You'll have to learn your chords and how to tune the thing, to start. Might be a good idea to buy a music book written for total beginners too."

"—give it a name!"

"*Why*?!" shouted everyone in the room in unison, me aside.

"Oh, c'mon, guys! Didn't they teach you that you have to give all your stuff a name back in elementary school?"

"They taught us to write *our own* names on all our stuff! That's totally different!" shouted Tomoyo, but I wasn't about to back down. I wanted to give my guitar a name—a *cool* name—no matter what she thought about it! "Andou, *please*, take my advice for once and don't do this! Naming your guitar is the single cringiest thing you could *possibly* do here!"

"Naming a guitar is cringe?! Oh, you *didn't*! You've just made an enemy of every *K-On!* fan in the country!"

"It's cute when girls do it, so they get a pass! Guys don't! Actually, make that *you* don't!"

"Peh! Sexism, much?" *To think society's favoritism of females has reached this far already! First they got women-only train cars, now only women get to name their guitars?!* "Think about it, Tomoyo! We need to do away with all this discrimination! Modern Japan needs to sit down and rethink the meaning of gender equality! We need to take clear, concrete steps toward becoming a *truly* equal society!"

"That sounds nice and all, but it's got crap all to do with you naming your stupid guitar!"

Rats! Thought I'd managed to get away with changing the subject. If I were having this debate with Hatoko, I would've totally been able to sweep the original topic under the rug by making big, sweeping statements like that.

Hmm... Well, whatever. Not like I need Tomoyo's permission in the first place! It's my guitar, and I can name it if I want to! I reclaimed my guitar from Hatoko and stared at its overwhelmingly gorgeous, aesthetically impeccable form, waiting for the perfect name to come to me.

"It's gotta be 'bloody' *something*, right...? Then again, it sorta feels like I've been overusing that word lately. Its body's black, so maybe I could play

that up with ‘ebon’ or ‘umbral’ or something? Wait, no, I’m getting ahead of myself. It’s a *guitar*, so I’ve gotta work music vocab in there somewhere. Like ‘soloist,’ or ‘melody,’ maybe… But actually, I dunno…”

I mumbled to myself as potential names for my new partner flowed through my mind. Heh heh heh! Things are really getting fun now! Nothing works my soul up to a fever-pitch quite like coming up with a new name! Sure, the others are giving me major side-eye, but that doesn’t bother me at all!

“All right, I’ve got it!” I declared at the end of my long deliberation. I knew none of the others would care about my guitar’s christening, but I intended to announce it to them in a grand fashion anyway. “This guitar’s name shall be…*Infinity Maria*!”

Infinite, as in the infinite tones and tunes manifested by its six strings of steel! Maria, as in, like, I dunno, it just sort of feels like guitarists have a thing about giving their guitars women’s names, for whatever reason. Maria also has all sorts of fancy religious implications and stuff, which makes it even cooler, probably! Of course, saying Infinity Maria every time will probably get a bit old, so I’ll just call her Maria for short.

Dang, that’s cool. My Maria is hella cool. No, that’s not quite right—the word I’m looking for is ravishing! There’s no way my Maria could be this ravishing!

“Ooh? So its name’s Maria? That’s so cute!” said Hatoko, reaching for the guitar with a big old smile on her face. The moment before her fingertips brushed the instrument, though, I snatched it away at top speed!

“Keep your filthy hands away from my Maria!” I shouted as menacingly as I could manage. Ooh, that was great! I was totally acting like a real rock star just now, wasn’t I?

“M-My hands aren’t dirty! I wash them all the time!” said Hatoko, who looked a little hurt.

“I’m not talking about *physical* filth!” I countered. “I’m talking about the filth that’s accrued upon your spirit—in other words, the filth that pollutes your very soul!”

“My soul?! Is my soul really dirty?!”

“It is indeed. Your soul is downright corrupted!”

I was saying whatever crap sprung to my mind on the fly, but truth be told, I could only imagine Hatoko’s soul, or heart, or *whatever* being as clean and beautiful as could be. If somebody asked me who the most purehearted person I knew was, I’d say it was Hatoko without even having to think about it. I knew very well what a virtuous person she was, but this wasn’t the time for honesty. It was the time for stupid, ill-advised horseplay!

“Ugh, the *stench*!” I said with a grimace, fanning my hand in front of my nose. “You smell worse than barf!”

“W-W-Waaah! Juu, you *jerkface*!” wailed Hatoko. She ran over to Tomoyo and clung to her shirt, almost in tears. “Ugh… Tomoyo, do I smell worse than barf…?”

“No. Look, Hatoko, there’s this guy in Part 1 of *JoJo* called Speedwagon, and Andou was just quoting this famous line where he describes Dio…”

Tomoyo launched into an explanation of the *JoJo* reference I’d just dropped, and I was left to stare on in horror. *Hey, stop it! When you go out of your way to explain it like that, it makes it look like I told a joke that didn’t land and you had to tell her why it was funny!* I began to consider the merits of avoiding reference humor entirely when I was bantering with Hatoko from then on. She never got them, which meant that instead of coming across as jokes, they came across as me straight up badmouthing her.

Just then, a patch of empty air in the club room began to visibly distort. You’d think that would be shocking, but none of us so much as batted an eyelash. We knew perfectly well that said distortion was a sign that Chifuyu was using *World Create* to make a Gate from her school to our room. And, just as expected, a moment later, a little girl stepped out from the rift in space.

“Hey, Chifuyu!” I said. “You’re pretty late today, huh?”

“Mnhh,” Chifuyu grunted in vague agreement.

“Something happen?”

“I had to talk to Cookie a little.”

“Oh, with Kuki?” I said, enunciating *all* nine demons.

“She said she wants to come over and play soon.”

“Huh, cool.”

“What’s that, Andou?” Chifuyu asked, pointing at *Maria*, who lay slumbering within my arms.

“Mwa ha ha! An excellent question! *This* is my newfound partner in crime; my fated companion for a lifetime! Her name? *Infinity*—”

“A guitar. Wooow. Let me see.”

“—*Maria*, hey, ouch! Ow, stop! Chifuyu, don’t pull on it like that! I still have the strap around my neck! I’ll take it off, just gimme a second!”

I quickly unslung *Maria* from my shoulders and held her out to Chifuyu, whose eyes sparkled with wonder as she reached out to take the instrument. I’d *definitely* grabbed her interest. *Man, I didn’t think she’d be* this *happy just to hold a guitar! Sometimes it feels really nice to lend your stuff out.*

“Can you play it, Andou?” asked Chifuyu.

“But of course! I can’t play right now, though. I didn’t bring the amp with me.”

“The amp?”

“An amp’s a piece of equipment you need to make an electric guitar play music!” I explained, proudly passing down the knowledge that I myself had just gained about five minutes beforehand.

Chifuyu’s eyes shined even brighter than ever. “You know so much stuff, Andou!”

“Naaah, I’m not *that* special or anything! This is stuff that anyone who plays the guitar would know. It’s common sense, really.”

Oh man*, does it ever feel nice to bask in the admiring gaze of an elementary schooler!* In fact, it felt *so* good that I didn’t even hear Sayumi and Tomoyo muttering something to the tune of “Do you suppose he even *has* a sense of shame?” and “I’m so far past being fed up with him that now I just sorta feel bad for him.” Nope. Didn’t notice or care at all!

“Wooow. Guitars are so cool,” said Chifuyu, turning her sparkle-filled gaze up to me. “Andou?”

“Yes?”

“Can I have it?”

“Hell no!” I screeched. It was such an unreasonable request, I couldn’t stop myself.

“Stingy.”

“No, look, I don’t think you understand the scale of the situation! This thing was *so* expensive! I can’t just give it away!”

“Please...?”

“Gwahaugh!”

She gave me the puppy-dog-eyes treatment, and I recoiled reflexively. How can this kid so easily make just the right expression to pierce your heart like a knife?! That’s the sort of look that could make me hand over a guitar or two without a second thought if I let it catch me in its clutches!

You can’t let her dominate your will, Andou Jurai—nay, Guiltia Sin Jurai! If you give up your guitar now, you’ll teach Chifuyu that she can get anything she wants by begging for it! She might turn into the sort of woman who works her wiles to convince creepy old men to buy her stuff! For the sake of her future, you have to teach her that she won’t always get everything she wants that easily! And, more than anything, you can’t let anyone take Maria away from you!

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t... Look, Chifuyu. *Maria*’s my partner. You might even say that she’s my other half!” I declared with renewed resolution. I’d done it—I’d successfully resisted an elementary schooler’s fiendishly potent guilt trip!

“Boo,” droned Chifuyu with a pouty frown. A moment later, though, her expression brightened and she clapped her hands. “Okay, then let’s play a game.”

“A game?” I parroted, confused.

“Close your eyes, Andou.”

I did as I was told, wondering if I was the only person who got a little excited when a girl told him to close his eyes, or if that was just a general guy thing. A moment later, Chifuyu said “Okay,” and I opened them back up again. Needless to say, nobody had kissed me during the eyes-closed period because we live in a bleak reality where hopes and dreams go to die.

I looked down to witness something totally inexplicable. *Maria* was lying on the floor, and beside her, *Maria* was lying on the floor.

“Th-There’s *two Maria*s?!” Indeed, not one, but *two* captivatingly designed black and red guitars graced the ground before me. “Maria…since when did you learn the Shadow Clone Jutsu?!”

“Guitars can’t do that! Actually, humans can’t do that either!” jabbed Tomoyo.

“Maria, don’t you know that you’re squandering your memory capacity by making a physical double of yourself?”

“Quit acting like you’re Hisoka!”

“Oh, I get it now. The copy acts as your En too, right?”

“This isn’t Kortopi’s Gallery Fake power at work!”

“God dammit, who the hell put a copy-sticker on my *Maria*?! The copy’ll destroy the original for sure if I take it off!”

“It’s not Ermes’s Stand ability either!”

Tomoyo’s ability to identify my references with pinpoint accuracy never failed to impress. In truth, of course, I knew from the start what had *actually* happened: *Maria*’s sudden duplication was *World Create* at work once again. Chifuyu could create anything with her power, and that meant that one of them was almost certainly a copy she’d made.

“Okay, Andou,” said Chifuyu with a goading stare, “which is the real one? Right, or left?”

Oh, I get it now. So that’s the game we’re playing. “In other words, we’re testing whether or not my love for *Maria* is the real deal, right?”

“Right.”

“If I *really* value *Maria* as much as I say I do, there’s no way I’d mix her up with a fake, right?”

“Right. And if you pick the wrong one, I get to have the guitar.” Chifuyu crossed her arms, threw out what little chest she had, and spoke in an ever so slightly more aggressive tone than usual.

From an objective standpoint, her proposal was completely unreasonable. I had absolutely nothing to gain from accepting her challenge, and I had an awful lot to lose. I’m talking massive risk for zero potential profit! I could lose the guitar that I’d just bought the day before! What sort of absolute ignoramus would accept a deal like that?

“Mwa ha ha! Interesting! Very well, then—I accept your terms!”

It’s me! I’m the ignoramus! I’m the sort of man who dives headfirst into completely meaningless challenges without sparing them a second thought!

“I knew you’d say yes, Andou. I can always count on you,” said Chifuyu with a satisfied nod. That meant, surely, that she’d been moved by my downright chivalrous display of confidence. “I had faith that you’d be stupid enough to accept a bet I won’t lose anything from, whether or not you win.”

“Wait, you knew?! You had that all planned out?!” *Crap! I think I just got set up!*

It would’ve been really hard to back out of the challenge at that point, though. I’d made up my mind, after all! Instead, I turned around and addressed the three high schoolers behind me.

“All right…don’t try to stop me, everyone! This is my fight, and I have to see it through, even if that does mean going up against Chifuyu,” I growled, doing my best to sell a “oh no, our friend’s being manipulated by the enemy and I have to fight her now, woe is me!” sort of atmosphere.

The three high schoolers behind me, meanwhile…

“Oh, that reminds me—I heard that the baseball club won their second match the other day.”

“Ooh, I heard that too! They’re really giving it their all this year, huh?”

“A first-year on the team has been contributing majorly to their success, supposedly.”

…were engaged in a completely unrelated conversation. They couldn’t have cared less, and they weren’t shy about showing it. Isn’t that just a bit much, guys? Couldn’t you pay at least a little attention to the holy war playing out right next to you? Come on, your friends are fighting each other! That’s one of the most exciting plot developments you can get in a supernatural battle story!

I shook off my indifference-induced aggravation and refocused my attention on Chifuyu and her game, getting down onto my hands and knees and giving both guitars an extremely thorough inspection. No matter how I looked at them, though, they were completely identical. The little screw-things on the top bit of the neck were even turned to the same angles! She’d even copied the fingerprints on the body!

“Hey, Chifuyu, can I touch them?” I asked.

“I’ll allow it,” she replied immediately.

Guess that goes to show how confident she really is. She thinks there’s no way I’ll figure it out, even if I do touch them.

I picked up each guitar in sequence, carefully comparing them. I felt how heavy they were, listened to the sounds they made, but…nothing. They were exactly the same, or at the very least, if there *were* any subtle differences, I was too low-level of a musician to pick them out. Once again, I realized just how incredible of a power *World Create* really was. I hated to admit it, but she had duplicated my *Maria* flawlessly.

Left or right? Which could the real one be?

“Oh, I know. Andou,” Chifuyu muttered happily as I agonized over my decision, “you should break the guitar you think is fake.”

“I should *what*?!”

“If you really know the answer for sure, then why not?”

“Ugh…f-fine, then!” The show of confidence I’d made when I jumped into the challenge had come around to bite me in the ass. There was no way I could refuse after playing it up that much! My sense of pride just wouldn’t allow it!

That lent a whole new degree of danger to the situation. If I messed up and picked the wrong one, I’d end up murdering my beloved partner with my own two hands. Curse you, Chifuyu, you conniving little brat! How dare you put this sort of pressure on me! What sort of elementary schooler’s

capable of that level of strategy, anyway?! For crying out loud, why did you have to go and make this battle's stakes so incredibly heavy?!

"Hmm...?" I muttered. A sudden burst of noise surged through my mind. A ceaseless, disharmonious melody bearing a subtle but unmistakable trace of dissonance. A harsh, grating din resounded in my ears, reverberating mercilessly and endlessly. What could that noise, that tune of cacophonous malaise have been?

"I see now..." I muttered. Not only had I put my thoughts together, I'd done so while dropping an absolute *ton* of music jargon into my internal monologue. I was back in the game!

"I've figured it out, Chifuyu!" I declared.

"Okay," she replied, pointing at the two guitars. "In that case, pick the one that you think I made, right or left, and break it. If you break the right one, you win."

"Got it!" I agreed with a confident nod, reaching down toward the guitars. "The babe on the left or the honey on the right? Nah, bro! Not even!"

I reached out with *both* hands, grabbing *both* guitars by their necks, and held them up overhead! A look of shock ran across Chifuyu's face.

"Andou, what are you—"

"Don't make me ralph! This is totally bogus!" I shouted triumphantly, then made like a rock star and slammed both the guitars into the ground with all my might! Or maybe I should say I made like Jidanbou unleashing his ultimate Jidan Banzai Strike Festival technique? Point is, I *smashed* those suckers against the floor, and both of their necks snapped in half with a shower of splinters! That horrible, cacophonous crash would be the last noise those copies ever made!

Incidentally, there's a very good reason why I suddenly got real "eighties guitar guy" at the end there! You see, when my emotions reach a boiling point, I have a bad habit of suddenly getting into character, regardless of whether or not it's situationally appropriate for me to do so. I had an inkling that my verbiage may have been absolutely atrocious, but I didn't let that bother me. *After all, suddenly being in my element makes me hella cool!*

"I'll admit, Chifuyu, it wasn't a bad plan!" I said with a boastful grin as I tossed the two trashed guitars over my shoulders. Guitar-guy-time was over, mostly on account of the fact that I wasn't good enough at talking the talk to keep it up for much longer. "Your only mistake was turning the pressure up one notch too far. I bet you thought that you were dealing the finishing blow, but the truth is, you were digging your own grave! You planned your way right into a corner!"

Chifuyu had told me to break the guitar I thought was fake, but when I finally stopped to think about it, that command was totally inexplicable. After all, the whole point of the contest was for Chifuyu to have an excuse to take *Maria* from me!

When I thought about it with that fact in mind, her last-second addition to the challenge made literally no sense. Chifuyu's condition for victory was me picking the wrong guitar...but with the extra rule, that would mean that I'd also *break* the real guitar! No matter which guitar I picked, Chifuyu's ultimate victory condition—getting her hands on the real guitar—would be impossible to fulfill!

Not even an elementary schooler would be stupid enough to put a condition on their challenge that entirely eliminated the possibility of their victory, and that meant that, for some reason, Chifuyu believed that no matter which guitar I destroyed, it wouldn't be a problem for her. Why would she believe that? Simple: *both* of the guitars that she had presented to me were replicas! Most likely, the second I closed my eyes, Chifuyu had used her power to stash the real guitar in an extradimensional space, then conjured up two copies for the sake of the game.

"It was an excellent plan that used *World Create* to its fullest potential. You have my praise, Chifuyu! I'm afraid, however, that you've got a long way to go before you can hope to defeat *me* in a battle of wits!"

I reveled in my victory like a gambler who'd just won the jackpot in an illicit back-alley casino! Mwa ha ha! Though, honestly, this was a pretty played-out plot twist. Taking a game of "which is the real one?" and making the twist be "the answer is neither!" is seriously as played-out as it gets! So played-out, in fact, that it's come all the way around and become a true classic! You underestimated my encyclopedic knowledge of genre clichés, Chifuyu!

"All right, hurry up and give back the real Maria!"

Chifuyu didn't reply. She was standing stock-still, silently gaping at me. I assumed that she was just petrified with shock at her complete and utter defeat, but eventually, she looked up at me with pure disbelief in her eyes.

"A-Andou," she stammered, "why did you break both of them?"

"Huh?"

"I told you to pick the *real* one, didn't I?"

"...Huh?" *Wait, wait, wait. Something's wrong here.* "Ch-Chifuyu? That, umm, that was just a trick, right? Like, the question itself was a trap...?"

"I wouldn't pull a dirty trick like that. I play fair and square."

"B-But then, why would you say that I should break the one I think is fake? You realize that meant that if I lost, I'd end up breaking the real guitar, right?"

"...Ooh," said Chifuyu as the light of understanding dawned in her eyes.

"You only just noticed?!"

"Whoops."

"This is more than just a *whoops*!" My genius-level deductions had completely gone to waste! "Wait. Just wait a second..."

I forced myself to calm down and dispassionately analyze the situation. Basically, I'd read too deep into the setup for my own good while Chifuyu had legitimately just wanted to enjoy a silly little game.

Sheesh—turns out I'm the one who planned his way into a corner in the end! I suppose I do make a habit of thinking too hard about this sort of thing. I can't help but pick up on the tiny little details that an ordinary person would ignore! They just jump right out at me, and I can't help but overthink them! It's, like, in my nature or something! Oh, if only I could be like an ordinary person and not read into everything so much. I'm sure that must be a much happier way to live one's life...

Suddenly, my self-aggrandizing inner monologue was interrupted by an extremely important realization. I slowly, fearfully turned my head, looking back over my shoulder to where I'd casually discarded a certain pair of objects. One of them had vanished—Chifuyu must have canceled her ability. The other guitar, however, had not disappeared and was lying on the floor...in pieces.

"Mariaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

I sprinted to her side, falling to my knees and cradling her shattered neck in my arms. My cries—the lamenting wails of a broken man who'd just slain the one he loved most with his own two hands—would linger in this club room until the end of time, echoing away for all to hear.

I mean, okay, Sayumi was *right there* and could fix the guitar in the blink of an eye, and in some distant corner of my mind I was aware of that, but I was too swept up in the scene to let that inconvenient little fact disrupt my performance.

Roughly a week after my fateful meeting with Maria...

"Good morning, Juu!"

"Hey."

I stepped out from my front door to find my childhood friend waiting for me, and the two of us headed off to school. As we walked along, making our usual casual chit-chat, Hatoko suddenly changed the subject.

"Oh, right! What happened to your guitar?"

I quickly averted my gaze. "Sh-She's, uhh, sealed away in my closet right now."

"'Sealed away'?"

"She's building up power in anticipation of the fated battle that's soon to come."

"Huuuh. I see," said Hatoko with a little nod that said she'd seen all the way through to the truth of the situation.

"I-It's not like I got bored with her, for the record!" I shouted.

"I know, I know!" She replied with a chuckle, smiling in that mischievous sort of way that makes people come across as cute even when you *know* it means they're making fun of you.

I fell silent. I didn't have a decent retort on hand because, in truth...I'd gotten bored with my guitar. Just a week later, and all that passion had completely faded. In my defense, playing the guitar's *really* friggin' hard! I couldn't memorize the chords at all, and holding the strings down made my

fingers hurt like hell! Plus, I just didn't have the free time for that sort of thing. I had tons of TV shows to watch, video games to play, and manga to read!

Anyway, to make a long story short, me and guitars were just a poor match. *Ugh…what a waste of money that was.*

"You've always gotten bored with new hobbies just as quickly as you get excited about them, Juu!"

"I'm a man with the capacity for both intense passion and dispassionate logic, after all."

"Of course you are!" replied Hatoko, brushing me off in a way that actually stung *more* than it would've if she'd just come out and criticized me.

"That guitar's moment in the spotlight is still a ways off," I sighed. Like, a long ways off. Potentially an eternity. Maria's gone from main heroine to written out of the story in a single chapter.

Another World

Chapter 4: A New Form Is Revealed

A truly stupendous revelation struck me—something so obvious, I couldn't believe it had taken me this long to realize it. In the half year since our powers had awakened, I'd spent each and every day thinking about them, but somehow, this application had *completely* slipped my mind.

And I don't just mean I thought about *Dark and Dark*. I took *all* of our powers into consideration, spending sleepless night after sleepless night pondering all of their myriad ramifications…so how? How could this have escaped me for so long? How could the truly fearsome potential slumbering within *World Create*'s capabilities have sailed so far over my head?

"Today…I have come to realize what a sad and ignorant creature I truly am," I admitted to my four clubmates. I stood before them in our club room, shoulders slumped with crestfallen resignation.

As I fell silent, the sheer weight of my regret grinding away at my very soul, Tomoyo piped up with a question. "What on earth are you talking about, Andou?"

"Tomoyo…I am a fool. I thought that I'd been facing our powers with more sincerity and dedication than anyone, but in the end, I was just telling myself that. It was self-complacency and nothing more."

"Wh-What does *that* mean…? Seriously, what's wrong with you?"

"Did you realize something about our powers?" asked Sayumi, her tone grave.

I nodded. "I've never felt my own stupidity so keenly. Dammit! How?! How did it take me this long to realize?! If only I'd noticed sooner…"

I clenched my fist, slamming it down on the table. Chifuyu, who was sitting nearby with Squirrely clutched in her arms, looked up at me with concern written all over her face.

"Andou…?"

"Chifuyu…I'm so sorry. If only I'd noticed sooner—if only I'd taken more care to consider *World Create*'s terrible potential…"

"Is this about me?"

"Yes. Yes, it's about you, Chifuyu," I replied with a grave nod.

"W-Well, what is it?!" shouted Tomoyo, who looked like she was well on her way to a total panic. "Quit dragging this out and just say it, already!"

"Very well… It's only a matter of time before one of you realizes it, anyway. *Somebody* has to say it, and if one of us has to dirty their hands…it might as well be me."

Tomoyo gulped, and the rest of the club looked just as nervously apprehensive.

"Today, I realized…" I began, then paused for dramatic effect.

“With Chifuyu’s power on our side, we can cosplay as literally anything we want to, right?”

Her power could create anything. That meant she could create whatever clothes and weapons we wanted! *Gaaah, how did it take me this long to realize?!*

“You spent all that time getting us prepped for something super serious, and *that’s it*?!” roared Tomoyo, tearing the frigid silence that had fallen over the club room to pieces.

“What’re you talking about, Tomoyo?! Do you have any idea how much of today I spent regretting the fact that I didn’t come up with this sooner?”

“No, and I don’t care!”

Meanwhile, in the background, Hatoko was breathing a sigh of relief, and Sayumi was shaking her head.

“Oh, is that all? Phew! Juu was acting so serious, I thought something really bad had happened!”

“I think it’s better to assume on principle that if Andou sounds serious, he’s about to say something unbelievably stupid.”

I did my best to not let them break my groove and went back to gleefully expounding upon my epiphany. “You remember how Chifuyu made us a bunch of tennis outfits the other day, right? That’s what made me finally put the pieces together! If she can do that, then of course she could make costumes too!”

“That *is* technically true,” admitted Tomoyo. “Making that sort of thing would be easy for her.”

“Though strictly speaking, what I’m picturing isn’t quite the same thing as cosplay. I’m not looking to get her to make clothes to wear for fun—I’ve been putting some serious thought into a combat-ready outfit to wear when we’re finally dragged into a serious battle!”

“I really don’t care *what* sort of thought you’ve been putting into this. Anyway, you can cosplay all you want, but I’m out.”

“Why?”

“‘*Why*’? C-Cause it’s embarrassing, duh,” stammered Tomoyo, her face beet-red. That, of course, wasn’t even close to enough to convince me to back down.

“Hmph! You know, people only feel shame when they know deep down that they have something to be ashamed of!” I, meanwhile, have a heart that’s completely unblemished by such impurities! Day after day, I blaze my own trail at full blast, and nothing can stop me!

“So, anyway—Chifuyu!” I turned to the girl who stood at the center of this whole conversation. “Make me Cloud’s sword from *FFVII*!”

“How is that anything other than straight-up cosplay?!” snapped Tomoyo, but I couldn’t even hear her anymore.

“And I don’t mean the Buster Sword—I’m talking about the sword from *Advent Children*! The one that splits up into a bunch of smaller swords!”

“Hey! Dammit, Andou, listen to me!”

“Shut up and stay out of this, Tomoyo! I know you, and I know that you understand *perfectly* well just how stupidly cool that sword is! I *just* lent you the Complete edition on Blu-ray, didn’t I?!”

“O-Okay, I’ll admit, that sword *is* ridiculously cool… And the part where he did an Omnislash with it *did* give me goose bumps…”

“Please, Chifuyu, do it! Bring that nameless blade into reality!”

I poured my everything into my request…but the Empress of Genesis just shook her head.

“B-But, why?! Why not, Chifuyu?! Are you saying that I’m not worthy of wielding it yet?!”

“Playing with knives is bad, so no.”

“Ugh!” I immediately crumbled in the face of her eminently respectable opinion. Like, literally, to my knees. At the point that your request leads to an elementary schooler scolding you, there’s really no saving it.

Evidently, blades and guns were featured on Chifuyu’s internal list of banned goods. You might recall that this is the same girl who created an impossibly vast array of weaponry during her mock battle with Hatoko, but those were the sort of practice weapons you’d use in training. The guns she’d made back then fired rubber bullets, and the bladed weaponry was all blunt.

I gave it a little more thought. “Yeah, okay. You’re right, Chifuyu. We probably shouldn’t be getting our hands on actual weapons like it’s nothing.” Cloud’s sword aside, I was also planning on having her make the Sakabatou Shinuchi and Zabimaru’s Shikai form, but those would have to go on ice as well.

Chifuyu could probably make blunted versions of them easily enough, but that would completely defeat the purpose. Swords are cool *because* they’re dangerous, and if they can’t cut, there’s no point anymore. Which isn’t to say that I didn’t have a small mountain of homemade replica weapons piled up in my room, of course, but it just felt sort of wrong to have Chifuyu go out of her way to make them if they weren’t even gonna be real.

“All right, if weapons are off the table…” What else could I have her make? I’ve already got like three sets of bandages in my bag, so no point asking for more of those, and I just got myself a new pair of fingerless gloves the other day… Ah, of course! “An eyepatch! Chifuyu, make me an eyepatch!”

“Oh, great. Right back into cliché chuuni territory,” sighed Tomoyo with a roll of her eyes.

Hey, don’t call it cliché! You can’t just override the appeal of eyepatches with a single word and call it a day, especially when it’s that word! Eyepatches grant the wearer an unbalanced aesthetic that just screams corruption! They give your appearance a mysterious edge that implies hidden powers, a past shrouded in secrecy, wounds that will never heal, and

so on! They're shadowy and ominous in so many different ways! Eyepatches: hella cool!

While I took a moment to sit back and reflect upon the intoxicating awesomeness of eyepatches, Chifuyu cocked her head.

"What kind?"

"A cool one!"

"The ones you get at the doctor's? Or the ones pirates wear?"

Wait, of course! She's right! Eyepatches are indeed split up into two major categories: black and white!

White eyepatches are the ones you get at the hospital. They're light, breathable, and are clearly designed with medical purposes in mind. The black ones, on the other hand, are the ones that old-school pirates used to wear. In the modern era, they're pretty much exclusively used for cosplay purposes. Some really fancy ones are made of leather, some have the string part replaced with a belt, some have silver designs inlaid into them—there are all sorts of varieties, really. There *are* other types of eyepatches, of course, but those two varieties account for the majority you'll see on a day-to-day basis.

The question was, though: which type did I want? Gotta go with black, right? Like, if I'm gonna have Chifuyu make something for me, shouldn't I go all out and get the most stylish one possible? But on the other hand, white has its own appeal too... Should I lean into how they're so uncool that they wrap all the way around and become cool again?

"Mngggh..." I groaned, caught in a conundrum the likes of which I'd never experienced before. It wasn't long before a flash of inspiration struck me, though. "I want both!"

Chifuyu nodded, then invoked *World Create*. Two eyepatches instantly appeared on the table: one black, and one white. I, of course, grabbed them and equipped them both at the same time, covering both eyes!

Wham! Cool factor: massively enhanced! And twice over, at that! "If you chase after two rabbits, you'll catch neither"? Maybe for lesser mortals, sure, but I'm a man who kicks petty little truisms like that to the curb, right along with "common sense" and "objective reality"!

I turned to face my clubmates, eager to reveal the sealed state of my accursed eyes and revel in their reactions. That's when it hit me.

"Wait a minute! I can't see!"

"Of *course* you can't!" replied all of my clubmates in unison.

"C-Curses... Who would've thought that wearing two eyepatches would render you blind...?"

"Who would've thought you'd extend your dual-wielding obsession to eyepatches, of all things... There really are no limits to your stupidity," sighed Sayumi, sounding as wholeheartedly exasperated as I'd ever heard her. "Andou, I'd like you to take a moment to calm down. You're irritating enough on a day-to-day basis, but today's antics are reaching new heights of obnoxiousness."

That one kind of hurt, honestly, and I hung my head with shame. I also took off the eyepatches. Couldn't exactly keep myself blindfolded forever.

"That must be so much fun," Hatoko suddenly mumbled. "It's not fair if Juu's the only one who gets to dress up! I wanna wear all sorts of nice clothes too."

"Wait a second, Hatoko," I interjected. "I'm not 'dressing up' here! This isn't a game! It's a *simulation*, and I'm preparing my combat form in anticipation of the holy war that's soon to come!"

"Hey, just curious: are you under the impression that *anything* make-believe-adjacent sounds cool if you call it a 'simulation'?" asked Tomoyo.

I twitched. Answering that question would be all sorts of inconvenient, so I decided to ignore it instead. "Anyway, that's a fair point, Hatoko. I don't wanna monopolize Chifuyu's power or anything, so we might as well all dress up in whatever outfits we want to!"

"Hey! Don't go dragging me into this!" snapped Tomoyo. "And for that matter, stop using Chifuyu like she's some sort of—"

"It's fine," Chifuyu blithely interjected, cutting off Tomoyo's harsh (but, frankly, reasonable) criticism. "It sounds a little fun."

"Oh…? Well, if you don't mind, knock yourself out, I guess," muttered Tomoyo. She still didn't sound totally satisfied.

Sayumi, on the other hand, heaved a weary sigh. "Well, it would seem the matter's been decided by majority rule. I can't say I'm especially enthusiastic, but so it goes."

And indeed, so it went! The literary club's very first cospl— Ah, no, scratch that. The literary club's very first combat form preparedness seminar began!

It was pretty obvious that if we just wore whatever outfits each of us chose for ourselves, the less self-assertive among us—namely, Tomoyo and Sayumi—would end up picking ones that were thoroughly benign and boring. As such, we ended up deciding that we'd choose our outfits by drawing lots! Each of us took turns writing outfits we wanted to wear and cosplays we wanted to try on little scraps of paper that we dropped into a box. In the end, we'd each pull out one piece of paper, and that would be the costume we'd have to wear.

"All right, I'm up first!" I shouted as soon as our preparations were complete. I was way too excited to contain myself and jammed my hand into the box before anyone could object.

Okay, what's it gonna be?! A Shihakushou? Or maybe a Saint Cloth?

"The time has come! Reveal yourself, my true form!" I shouted, plucking out a single truth from amidst the countless possibilities that spread out before me! I unfolded my chosen scrap of paper for all to see.

maid uniform

Oh god. I forgot to split them up by gender.

"Oh, I wrote that one!" Hatoko piped up nonchalantly. It was, in retrospect, a very Hatoko choice of costume. For a non-nerd like her, a maid uniform is probably the first thing that comes to mind when the subject of cosplay is broached.

"H-Hey, guys? I can try again, right? With the boys' and girls' outfits split up this time? Nobody wants to see *me* in a maid uniform, right...?"

Halfway through my stammering attempt to talk my way out of it, I noticed something: the other members of the literary club were all staring at me with disconcertingly pleasant smiles on their faces.

"You're the one who said we should do this in the first place, Andou. Remember?"

"I sorta want to see you in a maid uniform, Juu!"

"Quite. I would *love* to bear witness to your true form, myself."

"Do you want me to make it with knee socks, or stockings?"

Those four smiles bore down on me. They were *not* going to take no for an answer.

"D-Damnations! I'll let you off easy this time, but I'll be back!"

And so, Guiltia Sin Jurai fled the scene...only to be cut off before he could even make it out the door. *Dangit, Tomoyo, stopping time's cheating!*

And so...

"W-Welcome, Master!" I stammered as I pulled back the curtain of the changing room Chifuyu had made for us, my face contorted into a strained, twitching approximation of a smile. My outfit: a frilly, flouncy miniskirt maid uniform. My legs: stuffed into black stockings, for reasons I could not fathom. My head: adorned with one of those frilly maid headbands. The whole ensemble: *way* too elaborate. *Seriously, who on earth would* want *to see this?*

"Pfft! Aha ha ha ha ha! Oh, man, looking good, Andou!"

"Yeah! You look really cute, Juu! Aha ha ha ha!"

Tomoyo and Hatoko, unsurprisingly, burst out laughing without even the slightest regard for my humiliation. *Huh? That's weird. What about Sayumi? Normally, she'd be the first one to roast me at times like these!*

That's when I heard it: the distinctive snap of a camera shutter. I turned to look, and what do you know? Sayumi had pulled out a digital camera and was photographing me!

"Hey, wait a minute, Sayumi! Who told you to take *pictures* of this?!"

"Yes, good! That's perfect, Andou! The way you're writhing in shame is just *exceptional*!"

"*Please* try to make it less obvious how much you're enjoying this! Stop grinning at me like that!"

"He he he! You said that nobody wanted to see you in that outfit, but I assure you, at least one person in this room was very excited for this!"

"Sayumi..."

"You look just *adorable*, Andou!"

I couldn't bear it anymore and looked away. Something about getting called adorable by an older girl was just, like...I don't really know how to describe the sensation that welled up within my chest, but it was complicated, that's for sure! It was, like, a weird, unsettling mixture of happiness and utter humiliation.

"Perfect!" said Sayumi. "Now, I just have to splice one of these pictures with the one I took of Sagami, and—"

"Wait, what do you mean, Sagami?!"

"Ahem! Pay it no mind. Just some personal business."

"How is it *your* business when it's super obviously about me and Sagami?!"

"But it isn't! Technically speaking, it's about Sagami and you."

"It...huh? Wait, but that's what I said? Me and Sagami..."

"You have the order reversed, Andou," replied Sayumi, her tone dropping down a notch and a deathly serious expression crossing her face. Whatever she was trying to say, she was clearly not willing to compromise on it. "It's Sagami/Andou, not Andou/Sagami."

I fell silent. This is...I think they call it "shipping"? This is a shipping thing, right? I'm definitely not an expert, but I'm pretty sure that in fujoshi circles, the order of the names in ships is incredibly important for some reason. Like, a character's name being first means that they're a top, and a character's name being second means that they're...

"...a bottom?! Are you calling me a bottom?!"

"Well, yes. Obviously."

"How is *that* obvious?!"

"Frankly, Andou, you practically exude bottom energy."

"I *exude* it?! Why am I getting treated like some sorta pent-up mass of slavering bottom-lust?!"

"Incessantly loud and obnoxious idiot characters tend to be bottoms, on the whole."

"Wow, over-the-top verbal abuse much?!" This is the point where I'd be justified in getting, like, for-real upset, right? We have to draw a line in the sand somewhere, right?!

"A-All right, that's it, Sayumi! If you're gonna go *that* far to make fun of me, then I'm not letting you talk your way out of this!" I declared, thrusting the lottery box out to her. She hesitated for a moment, then seemed to resign herself and accepted it from me.

"Very well then, but I reserve the right to veto anything too risqué."

"What do you mean, risqué?"

"Like, for instance, one of my contributions: tighty-whities."

"No *crap* that's off the table! Wait, you actually put that in there?!"

"I thought it would be funny if you drew it."

"It would *not*! What were you planning on doing if *you* ended up with that one?!"

“I was operating under the assumption that common sense would rule it out if any of the girls ended up pulling it. You were the only one who would’ve been obligated to go through with it.”

“Ugh! Of all the dirty tricks…” It was a perfect plan to put me in danger without exposing herself to the slightest hint of risk. *Curse that woman and her terrible machinations!* (Casually dropping “machinations” into a sentence: hella cool.)

“But in the end, you drew the maid uniform instead. I suppose this was entertaining in its own right, so I’ll call it a win overall,” Sayumi chuckled as she pulled a slip of paper from the box and spread it open for all to see.

gym bloomers

The light faded from Sayumi’s eyes. Her cheerful smile was instantly petrified. Gym bloomers…? Impossible! Those were cast out from this world a generation ago!

“Ah, it’s another one that I wrote!”

“You again, Hatoko?” I sighed. I could more or less see how this had happened. Bloomers *were* another classic cosplay standby. They’d started out as actual, proper girls’ gymwear, way back whenever, but these days, they pretty much only exist for fetish purposes. I guess they’re still extremely popular among a certain subset of the male populace, though.

“Fine, then,” Sayumi said with a resigned nod after a long, hesitant pause. “I can hardly excuse my way out of this after having had so much fun teasing Andou, after all.”

“G-Go on, then. If you want to laugh, then do it,” said Sayumi, blushing distinctly as she stepped out from behind the curtain in her new costume.

Her top was a white short-sleeved shirt, the hems of which were bright blue. The fabric strained noticeably to contain her ample chest, upon which “Sayumi” had been handwritten, courtesy of Chifuyu. Down below, of course, she wore a pair of navy blue gym bloomers that clung to her hips like nothing else. Her long, slender legs were completely bared to the open air, and it was impossible not to notice the elegant line they formed as your eyes traced down from her thighs to her ankles.

All things considered, the outfit struck me as a little small. It was practically bursting at the seams, really. That might explain our reactions—*I’d* been greeted by uproarious laughter when I’d made my entrance, but this time, we could only descend into dumbfounded silence, me included. The silent consensus seemed to be that we could *not* allow ourselves to laugh, however much we wanted to.

The whole outfit just looked so…*so* painfully mismatched on her. She’d always looked deceptively old for her age, and that plus her full figure and exceptional height made the bloomers look just plain *wrong* on her.

Or, wait—maybe it's the opposite? Maybe that look works really well for her, actually? Sure, she doesn't look cute or trigger my must-protect nerd instincts, but she sorta goes beyond those. It's like she makes them look, I dunno...adultlike, in an erotic sorta way?

Then, in the middle of all that awkward silence, one girl chose to point at Sayumi and speak her mind.

"Sayumi, you look bad in bloomers."

Chifuyuuu! You can't just come out and say things like that!

Sayumi let out a quick, quiet sigh. "It's all right, everyone. You don't have to worry about offending me. Chifuyu's right, and I'm fully aware of it," she admitted, cutting straight to the point. Her cheeks were as red as could be, and her bare legs were shifting around anxiously. "I-I know perfectly well that I look old for my age. It's only natural that an outfit like this wouldn't suit me."

"What're you talking about?! You don't look *old*, you just look a little mature!" I shouted, frantically attempting to help her save face. "Heck, the fact that the bloomers don't suit you actually makes them *better*! It comes across as you, like, forcing yourself to wear them even though you *know* they won't look right on you, and that wraps around to give the whole thing a weird, backwards sorta appeal!"

There's gotta be a better way to put the appeal here into words...ah, of course! "It's just like when actresses who're *obviously* well into their thirties wear high school uniforms in porn—"

Then she punched me. A straight-up jab to the face so fast I couldn't even see it, hit man style.

"Hmph! I assure you, there's nothing good about not being able to pull off this outfit," Sayumi indignantly retorted. The sulky way she rattled it off was actually a little cute. A second later, though, every trace of that cuteness vanished, and I felt a chill run down my spine.

"Now then," said Sayumi, "I believe it's time for the next participant to join us. And I would like to note that if I, the club president *and* the eldest member present, had to be subjected to the abject humiliation of this outfit, then by the hierarchical standards of Japanese society, the rest of you have no right to veto *anything* you draw, no matter what it may be."

Sayumi held the box out to the three remaining members, chuckling in a way I could only describe as downright menacing. Tomoyo, Hatoko, and Chifuyu gulped in unison.

"O-Okay, then, I'll draw next!" said Hatoko after taking a moment to muster up her courage. "Hatoko, ready to go!"

Hatoko shoved her hand into the box. Not that it's super relevant here, but the whole shouting your name followed by "Ready to go!" or "Moving out!" thing actually dates back to the original *Gundam*. Hatoko probably had no idea about the source material, of course, or even that it was a reference at all. When a reference gets *too* widespread, it tends to enter the collective consciousness and become its own thing. This might not be *quite*

the same thing, but it's sort of like how people say stuff like "par for the course" or "down for the count" without even thinking about the sports they're theoretically referencing.

Hatoko did her best drumroll impression as she rifled around in the box, then she pulled a slip of paper out with a spirited "Ta-da!"

sun

"'Sun'?!" cried the entire high schooler division in simultaneous shock. That could only mean one thing.

"Oh, that's mine," said Chifuyu, as expected. She always had a way of subverting our expectations in a distinctly weird direction.

"Uhh...Chifuyu?" I said. "Does 'sun' mean, like, *the* sun? As in, the sun that shines up in the sky? Not, I dunno, a character named Sun?"

"Yeah. I mean the sun-sun."

"Gotcha. The big ol' orb in the sky, huh...?"

"You said to write what I wanted to be, so I wrote the sun."

"Uh. You...want to be the sun?"

"When I grow up, I wanna be a big, bright, warm presence for everyone."

"Wow, that's an incredible goal! But, I mean..." Could you not make this sound all nice and optimistic, please? It makes it really hard to make a joke out of the situation!

"Hey, Juu? What should I do now?" asked Hatoko, who seemed to be feeling a little put on the spot.

"I mean, don't ask me... You just have to go for it, right?"

And so, what I have to assume was the world's first sun cosplay was a go.

"Wooo, look at me! I'm the suuun!" said Hatoko as she drew the curtain back, making her entrance even weirder than it already would've been. I'm sure that *she* believed she was the spitting image of the sun, but the look and the mannerisms she was affecting were just *way* too strange.

Hatoko was wearing a huge orange sphere that obscured most of her body, leaving her arms and legs sticking out. It had a face painted on its center, and spikes protruded from its circumference. If you give an orange sphere spikes, arms, legs, and a face, there's only one thing people like me will associate it with.

"It's friggin' Don Patch!"

Turns out that wearing a sun costume makes you look sorta Don Patch-esque! Who knew that putting on a big fake sun could turn a regular human into a Wiggin' Specialist?

"Wooo, look at me! I'm Don Patch!"

"No, Hatoko, stop! You can't try to act as the character if you don't even know who they are! That's disrespectful to the source material!"

“Ugh… You know, this is actually reeeally heavy! I’m gonna go lean against the wall for a little, okay?” Weighed down by her ridiculously oversized costume, Hatoko tottered precariously over to the corner of the room and lodged herself up into it. “Hey, Juu? What are suns supposed to do, anyway?”

“Good question… Uhh, ah, got it! Y’know that old fable, The North Wind and the Sun? We can use that for reference! It personifies the sun and everything!”

“Oooh, okay!”

“The fable has the north wind and the sun get into a really stupid argument that an innocent traveler gets dragged into. It’s a tragic tale of a mere human being toyed with by the uncaring and malevolent forces of nature, unable to resist as they torment him to kill time!”

“Is that really what the story was about?!”

Well, I sure think it is. In my book, the sun and the wind really gave that traveler hell for no particular reason, what with the wind blowing him around and the sun overheating him and all.

“Actually, no, wait a second,” I backpedaled.

“What is it, Juu?” asked Hatoko. “Why do you look so serious all of a sudden?”

“I’ve been assuming that the traveler was a man this whole time…but isn’t it totally possible they were actually a girl?!”

“Huh?” Hatoko cocked her head. “Would the traveler being a girl change anything?”

“It would, massively! Think about it—that’d turn it into a story about two entities locked in a showdown to see who can make a woman take off her clothes! They’d be nothing but a couple of dirty perverts!”

“Th-That’s true, actually!”

“Could it be that this whole time, The North Wind and the Sun…”

North Wind: “*Forcing* a girl to take ’em off can’t be beat! If she says no, you just have to pull harder! It’s the best!”

Sun: “What’re you talking about, moron?! Of *course* it’s better when she takes ’em off herself! That way you get to see her get all shy in the filthiest way possible as she opens herself up to the pleasures of the flesh!”

North Wind: “Huh?! You kidding me?! You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Sun: “Oh yeah? As if *you* do! Okay, look—see the girl walking over there? Let’s use her to make it *very* clear which of us has the better grasp of eroticism!”

North Wind: “Oh, you’re on! And I’m going first!”

“…has been nothing more than the story of an epic clash between two incompatible fetishes?!”

“N-No way! I don’t *want* that to be the real story!” Hatoko shouted, blushing brightly.

Hmm. Okay, maybe that wasn’t a good choice of joke for a girl like her. I should try to keep the sex humor in reserve for when Sagami, the unapologetic degenerate, is around.

“I have to say, though,” said Sayumi, sweeping her gaze across the room, “the closest thing to a theme I can ascribe to us right now is ‘chaos.’”

Me in the maid uniform, Sayumi in her gym bloomers, and Hatoko as the sun. Yeah, Sayumi had a point. All of our outfits put together transcended “surreal” and landed squarely in the realm of chaos.

“Incidentally, Sayumi, I’ve been thinking a lot about that word lately. Did you know that the way that most Japanese people pronounce ‘chaos,’ the loanword, doesn’t actually line up with the way it’s said in English? Well, I’ve been pondering pretty seriously about whether the Japanese-style pronunciation or the proper English pronunciation sounds cooler, and—”

“I could not possibly care less.”

“Wow, ouch! And here I was, opening up to you about something that’s been seriously worrying me!”

“I also couldn’t care less about the sort of person who would seriously worry about something like that,” snapped Sayumi. Her criticism felt even more unreserved and scathing than usual. Probably the outfit’s fault. I imagined she didn’t have enough composure left to rein herself in.

In any case, we’d gone far enough that there was no turning back. Our only choice was to see this disaster through to the end!

“Okay, I’m next,” said Chifuyu, drawing a piece of paper from the box and spreading it open.

Straitjacket

“Oh, hey, it’s one of mine!” I noted, only for the girls in the room to simultaneously recoil with disgust.

“A-A-Andou…? What the *hell* were you trying to make us wear…?”

“What do you mean, Tomoyo…? W-Wait, no, that’s not it! I didn’t want to make *you* wear one! *I* wanted to wear one!”

“Why the hell would you want to wear a straitjacket?!”

“I mean, c’mon! They’re sorta cool, right?”

The oversized white garments contrasting sharply with the black belts wrapped all around them! Eyes and mouth sealed, arms bound in place, unable to move an inch! That sense of being completely restrained in every way has a sort of appeal that I can’t really put into words! It’s like your entire being’s been sealed away! That rules! Straitjackets: hella cool!

“*Spare* us, chuuni-boy,” sighed Tomoyo.

“But yeah,” I mumbled, “making Chifuyu wear a straitjacket’s sorta off the table, right? From, like, an ethical perspective, y’know? Like, having a kid do that sorta thing’s gotta be illegal, right?”

Chifuyu, however, shook her head. “It’s okay. I’ll try wearing it.”

I hesitated. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. I drew it, so fair’s fair.”

So, the thing about straitjackets is that you pretty much can’t put one on by yourself. As such, Sayumi accompanied Chifuyu into the improvised dressing room to give her a hand.

Some time later, Sayumi emerged from behind the curtain, her face distinctly pale. What had her looking so apprehensive? I couldn’t say, on account of the fact that I was too scared to ask. The moment the curtain slid open, though, a pretty good guess came to mind.

“Mmph! Mnhh, mph!”

Chifuyu stepped onto the scene wearing the full set: a straitjacket, a blindfold, and even a gag. Her oversized white clothes were bound by belts, restricting her movement in all the places where it really mattered. Her arms were fixed in front of her, one crossed over the other, and the blindfold was made out of what looked like some sort of drab, black leather.

“Mggh, mnph, mhhgh!” Chifuyu grunted. The gag was made from what looked like a white towel, wrapped all the way around her head, and the only noise she could make was a sort of pained, feverish moan.

She’d been completely robbed of her freedom, and her dignity as a human being was barely hanging on by a thread. There was only one appropriate reaction to seeing an innocent ten-year-old girl in a situation like that.

“Noooooooooooope!”

This is out, out, out of the question! And there we go, three outs, game’s over! Hell, one false move and we’d be over!

So, yeah, I dashed across the room and yanked off the blindfold and gag without a moment to spare. *Hooooly crap, that was nearly* really *bad! We were about to venture into fetish territories that are* definitely *best left untouched!*

“Bwah! I’m alive again,” said Chifuyu, looking completely nonchalant about the whole experience. Her being alive was definitely a good thing, though part of me had to note that *I* was the one who’d just nearly dropped dead out of sheer panic.

“Y-You okay, Chifuyu?” I nervously asked.

“Yeah. I’m fine,” she replied with a nod. It seemed that she had no idea how dangerous the waters we’d almost sailed into really were.

“Andou?” said Sayumi. “Is it just me, or does all of this reek of criminal activity?”

“It sure does… ’Course, the way you look in *your* outfit’s criminal in a whole different—actually, never mind, forget I said anything.” I course-corrected halfway through my thought on account of an overwhelmingly intense sensation of impending doom.

Just then, Chifuyu walked over to me. She'd gone with the sort of straitjacket that leaves your legs mostly unbound, so walking wasn't an issue. "Mnh. Andou, my back itches. Scratch it."

"Uh."

"I can't move my hands," she explained, straining her arms against the belts that bound them.

"R-Right, yeah. Makes sense. Sure." Chifuyu turned her back to me, and I knelt down to scratch it.

"A-Andou!" Tomoyo screamed out of nowhere. I looked over to find her blushing furiously, though I couldn't even begin to guess why.

"What? Something wrong?"

"I-I can, umm... I can s-see up your skirt."

"Huh...? G-Gaaah?!" Right! I forgot! I'm wearing a miniskirt maid outfit! Kneeling like that means giving the entire room a full-on panty shot! "T-Tomoyo, you perv!"

"I didn't *want* to see them!"

I quickly shot back upright and smoothed down my skirt, making sure everything down there was nice and covered again. *Man. I guess girls have to worry about all this stuff every time they bend their legs, huh? Must be rough.*

"Andou, hurry. It's really itchy," said Chifuyu, squirming uncomfortably and ignoring everything that wasn't taking place in her own little world.

"Right, okay! Uh, where? Here-ish?"

"A little to the right."

"Like, here?"

"Too far. More to the left."

"Okay, so, here?"

"Yeah. There, right there. Harder."

"Can do!"

"Mnh. Andou...t-too hard... Do it softer."

"Ah, my bad."

"Mnh. This tickles a little..."

Okay...is it just me, or does this feel weirdly suggestive to anyone else? I was starting to get the feeling that spending any longer on Chifuyu and her straitjacket would put me at risk of awakening to something best left dormant, so I decided to try to move things along.

"All right, that just leaves Tomoyo."

Tomoyo grunted with displeasure. "Yeah, I know already."

"And just so you know, the fact that you're last means that the bar's gonna be set *really* high for you!"

Things had ended up following quite a logical progression for the four of us that had already gone, after all. Starting with a maid outfit, hyping things up with gym bloomers, veering off on a surprise tangent with the sun, then going for an even more intense plot twist with a straitjacket! It might've just

been a coincidence, but we'd done a spectacular job of escalating things one costume after another.

"Nobody's gonna be satisfied if you draw some super boring cosplay, for the record! Pulling 'a nurse uniform' or whatever after all that lead-up would totally kill the mood!"

"St-Stop putting so much pressure on me," muttered Tomoyo as she timidly pulled a slip of paper out of the box.

Bikini armor

Yet again, a moment of silence fell over the room.

Okay, come on. Really? Which one of us is responsible for this half-assed attempt at fetish bait?

"Hey, Juu? What's bikini armor?" asked Hatoko.

"It's literally exactly what it sounds like," I replied. "Armor that's shaped like a bikini."

That is, armor designed to prioritize mobility above all else…if you want to make it sound reasonable and are talking to somebody who's *extremely* gullible. Realistically speaking, that sort of design is nothing more or less than a costume designed for exhibitionists who laugh in the face of the actual dangers of a battlefield.

"Huh? Would that even work as armor?" Hatoko followed up, cocking her head. "Wouldn't your belly button be totally exposed?"

"I mean, I guess it's technically better than going into battle in a set of robust lingerie, defense-wise." As best as I could tell, though, armor like that would really only be useful to practitioners of the Sexy Commando style of martial arts. "But seriously, though, who wrote this?"

I glanced around the room, and finally, one of the club's members timidly raised her hand. That member being Tomoyo.

"Wait, *you*?!"

"Wh-What?! Got a problem with that?! It was the first thing that came to mind when I heard the word cosplay, okay?!"

The fact that bikini armor was her first association with the word really exposed how much of a nerd she was deep down. "Well, you reap what you sow, then. Have fun with that."

"W-Wait a second! A-Are you serious?!"

"I mean, I might've given you a pass if somebody else had written it, but you really brought this upon yourself. Right, Sayumi?"

"Indeed. And from a public decency perspective, bikini armor is within the realm of reason. Wouldn't you agree, Hatoko?"

"Hmm… I still don't think I really understand this whole bikini armor concept, but I kinda want to see it now! Don't you, Chifuyu?"

"Do you want the chest part to be metal, Tomoyo? Or should it be cloth?"

The literary club was in a state of chaos. Tomoyo had no way to get herself out of her predicament.

“Grr—I’ll get you for this!”

Kanzaki Tomoyo fled! By which I mean, she invoked *Closed Clock* and poofed out of there like an Abra that’d just used Teleport. Chasing her down would be completely impossible…or so I thought, but then Tomoyo reappeared in her usual chair a second later.

Sayumi, no! You can’t use Route of Origin: Ouroboros’s Circle now! This is not an appropriate moment to pull out your awakened ability!

“U-Ugggh…” Tomoyo groaned as she emerged from behind the curtain, her face as red as an apple, or a tomato, or something. Not even just her face—her whole body was flushed red.

In terms of total skin coverage, her bikini armor was definitely on the lower end of the spectrum. It was a suit of armor so poorly considered, it was like whoever had designed it didn’t even *care* if her vitals were exposed. She’d apparently chosen to go with fabric for the chest area rather than actual armor, by the way.

“Oh, wow, bikini armor’s way cuter than I thought it’d be!” exclaimed Hatoko. “Looking sexy, Tomoyo!”

“It suits you better than I expected, I must admit,” added Sayumi.

Their praise seemed totally genuine, but it didn’t help un-flush Tomoyo’s face. She was busy covering her chest with one arm and her groin with another.

“Tomoyo…” I began, then hesitated.

“Wh-What?”

“The, uh… The way you’re covering yourself sorta makes it look like you’re posing? It, err, actually makes the whole thing look *more* suggestive, so I think you’d probably be better off not doing that.”

Tomoyo let out a strangled gasp and tore her hands away, flailing them about in the air for a while until finally clasping them together behind her back.

“C-Come on, say something…” she bashfully demanded.

“Uh, I mean… W-Well, honestly, it looks good on you.”

Bikini armor merges two very disparate styles: girly fashion and fighting fashion. That fusion, as it turned out, suited Tomoyo shockingly well. I vaguely remembered having learned somewhere along the way that Tomoyo was self-conscious about the size of her chest, but seeing her dressed like this made me realize that she really didn’t have anything to worry about. She wasn’t *stacked*, sure, but she was far from flat as a board. She had all the girl-bits you’d expect from, well, a girl.

Of course, actually *saying* any of that wouldn’t have made her feel better and *would’ve* counted as sexual harassment, so I kept my mouth shut.

“All right,” I said. “With that, our lineup’s complete! We’re all clad in our combat forms!”

Those being a maid outfit, gym bloomers, the sun, a straitjacket, and bikini armor. *Yup. Chaos, properly pronounced and everything.*

“S-So, what should we do now, guys?” I asked. “Wanna take a group photo or something?”

“*Hell* no!” shouted Tomoyo.

“Absolutely not,” stated Sayumi in a slightly quieter, but no less emphatic, tone. Those two already seemed set on writing their cosplay experience off as an unseemly stain upon their personal histories. To be fair, I was at least somewhat in the same boat.

“I’d like to take one!” piped up Hatoko. “Hey, Juu, let’s take a picture together!”

“Ugh… I think I’ll pass, thanks. I mean, look at me. I’m a *maid*.”

“Andou?” said Chifuyu. “I want to take one too.”

I hesitated. “Seriously?”

“As a keepsake.”

Is this really a good idea? Isn’t possessing a photo of a little girl in a straitjacket the sort of thing that gets people brought in for questioning by the police?

In any case, we wouldn’t be taking any pictures at all without borrowing Sayumi’s camera first. But just as I was about to ask her for it, a sleepy-sounding voice rang out from just outside our door.

“Heeey, open up! It’s me.”

A series of pounding knocks followed. It was the literary club’s advisor—in other words, Chifuyu’s aunt, Satomi Shiharu.

The five of us froze in our tracks. This was *not* good. Miss Satomi didn’t know about our powers, and she would put the pieces together that *something* was going on for sure if she saw us dressed like this. And even if we managed to keep the superpowers thing under wraps, nobody could walk in on this state of utter chaos and not think we were at least a little crazy.

What were we thinking, seriously? I’m wearing a maid uniform, for crying out loud! Before anything else, we had to change back into our uniforms on the double!

“Chifuyu! Deactivate your power!” I barked. Chifuyu, who was clearly a little panicked for once, nodded and immediately did just that. *World Create*’s effect ended, and everything that it had brought into the world disappeared in the blink of an eye. That’s all it took—Chifuyu had complete freedom to unmake the things she made at will.

“Ah,” I grunted, glancing downward as a sudden thought struck me just a moment too late. I was greeted by the sight of my lower body clothed only in a single pair of boxers. The maid outfit Chifuyu had given me had vanished like dust in the wind.

Wait. That means…the others are in the same predicament? They’re in their underwear too—no, wait a second. Setting aside Hatoko and Sayumi, was Chifuyu even wearing a bra? Considering her age, it’s a toss-up! I don’t think I felt anything when I was scratching her back a minute ago, right? A-And wait… Did Tomoyo have underwear on under her bikini armor…?

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I heard a very short, very quiet noise, like the beginning of an ear-piercing shriek cut off a second before it could ring out. I looked up reflexively to see what was going on—and then *Closed Clock* intervened, and my field of vision blacked out.

"H-Huh?!" What, am I out of usable Pokémon? Or did I get hit with a Cord-Cut? Did someone just sever my optic nerve?!

"Th-That was close," said Tomoyo. I couldn't see her, of course, but her tone of voice told me she was deeply relieved about something.

"H-Huh?!" exclaimed Hatoko. "Tomoyo, how do you have your uniform on already?!"

"I see. You used *Closed Clock*, didn't you? Well done, Tomoyo," added Sayumi.

I raised a hand to my face to find some sort of slightly stiff fabric wrapped around my head. A few pokes and prods later, I realized that it was my own jacket.

"D-Don't take it off yet, Andou!" said Tomoyo. "I'm finished changing, but the others need a minute!"

I'd more or less put the pieces together by that point. In the split second after Chifuyu released her power, Tomoyo activated hers, blindfolded me, then got dressed. Thanks to her efficient use of the power to stop time, any chance of me getting a sneak peek had been sealed away.

"...Killjoy."

"You say something?"

"Nope, nothing at all!"

There wasn't much I could do other than stand there quietly while the others got dressed. Stand there quietly, with only a pair of underwear to cover *me* up...but that's just how it goes, I guess. Guys just have to take the loss when it comes to this sorta stuff.

"Hurry up, Chifuyu!"

"Tomoyooo, help me put this on."

"Oh, for the—fine! Arms up!"

"Okaaay."

"Ah, Hatoko, I believe that's *my* skirt."

"Huh?! Ah, you're right. B-But then, where's mine?!"

As the girls got changed in a flustered panic, I just sat there, listening and worrying. It was stupid *Closed Clock*'s fault that—I mean, thanks to *Closed Clock*, I hadn't had to get smacked around or held in disdain for getting an eyeful of them, so I figured I should probably thank Tomoyo for that later.

...I should take the fact that I actually did get the tiniest of glimpses with me to the grave.

"Come on, people... What were you even doing in here?" Miss Satomi asked as she sat down at the table.

“We apologize, Miss Satomi. The room was a mess, and we were cleaning up all the books we’d left lying around so you wouldn’t have to see it,” Sayumi lied without batting an eyelash. Her poker face was really something. “In any case, it’s quite unusual for you to make your way to our club room. Did you have some business with us today?” she continued, changing the subject without missing a beat.

It was true—Miss Satomi almost never bothered stopping by our room. She was our club advisor on paper, at least, but she was critically lacking in motivation and let Sayumi handle the majority of the club’s actual administrative affairs.

“Oh. Not exactly... I mean, I don’t need something from *you*, per se,” Miss Satomi replied listlessly, then every so slightly narrowed her eyes. “I’ve got business with my niece today.”

With Chifuyu?

Miss Satomi turned her gaze to me, then to the girl sitting next to me. She frowned and continued in an unusually severe tone. “My sister called me just a moment ago. You didn’t go to school today, huh, Chifuyu?”

Chifuyu didn’t say a word, so I spoke up instead. “Huh...? What do you mean, she didn’t go to school?”

“What else *could* I mean? She stayed at home. She said she felt nauseous and feverish, supposedly, and wasn’t up to going.”

“Huh...? But, Chifuyu’s here now...”

“Right, and that’s the problem.”

Chifuyu had arrived at our club at the same time she always did. We’d all naturally assumed that she’d come over after she got out of school, but it would seem that wasn’t the case. She’d taken a sick day then shown up to hang out with us anyway.

“Did your fever break, Chifuyu?” asked Miss Satomi. She didn’t sound like she was accusing Chifuyu of anything, exactly, but her tone was *very* serious.

“It did,” replied Chifuyu after a moment of hesitation, her head hanging all the while.

“And you thought that since your fever broke, it’d be all right for you to come over?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, be honest with me, Chifuyu. Did you really have a fever this morning?”

Once again, Chifuyu didn’t reply, and an uncomfortable silence fell over the room. Miss Satomi stayed quiet as well, her face contorted into a surly scowl, until finally she let out a long, weary sigh.

“Mnhh. Well, whatever. Just go to school tomorrow, okay? My sister will tell me if you don’t.” Having said her piece, she stood up from her chair. “’Kay, that’s all from me today. Don’t stick around too late. Bye.”

With that halfhearted farewell, Miss Satomi left the room.

“Chifuyu…you didn’t go to school today?” I asked. I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. She’d seemed fit as a fiddle all throughout our cosplay—I mean, combat form rehearsal, after all. It was really hard to imagine that she’d been *that* sick earlier that same morning.

“Hey, Chifuyu? Why?”

Chifuyu hesitated, then simply replied, “I’ll go tomorrow,” and hopped out of her chair. Then she generated a Gate in front of herself and jumped through, fleeing the room before any of us could get a word in edgewise and leaving a deep, heavy silence in her wake.

WHAT DID EVERYONE PUT INTO THE COSPLAY BOX?
Andou
Straitjacket
Silver Skin Metal Jacket
Kimono (black)
Demon Magic Armor Lance
Shihakusho
Saint Cloth
The clothes or armor or whatever that appears when Feitan uses Pain Packer
Sayumi
Tighty-whities
Swimming briefs
Tailcoat
Light-blue haori (Shinsengumi costume)
Ceremonial kimono
Chifuyu
sun
president
dragon
seaweed
space
Hatoko
maid uniform
gym bloomers
miniskirt policewoman
bunny girl
wedding dress
Tomoyo
Bikini armor
Magical Girl
Sailor uniform
The Final Moon Fang Heaven-Piercer outfit
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Chapter 5: Bakunovel.

What is it about unusual words and superfluous vocab that sets my heart aflutter so?

Take my go-to descriptor for *Dark and Dark*: the stygian flames of purgatory. Throwing a fancy word like “stygian” into play when you’re talking about a superpower’s basically a given, right? You don’t have to stop there, though—you can slip that sort of word into everyday conversation as well and make your life exponentially cooler as a result!

Let’s start with some basic options:

• Real = Corporeal
• Proud = Vainglorious
• Stopped = Quiescent
• Visual = Ocular

Etcetera, etcetera. But that sort of substitution really is *basic*, isn’t it? They’re just synonyms, after all! Anyone can understand what you’re getting at if they have a half-decent vocabulary. That’s why a master of the craft can’t be satisfied with that sort of simple option. No, we use almost *completely* unrelated words for our substitutions!

Some practical examples:

• To run = To fly
• To open = To unleash
• A sign = A fell wind
• Hell = Sinner’s Paradise
• “I’ll kill you!” = “I’ll grant you the greatest mercy this world has to offer!”

Etcetera, etcetera. It’s just *so* cool. Using phrasings so obtuse that your word processor flags them as grammatical errors: *hella* cool.

“Oh, yeah, I get where you’re coming from on this one. I guess even you have a decent idea every once in a while,” said Sagami, nodding in agreement. I’d taken the brief break period between classes to extol the virtues of deliberately elaborate vocabulary, and he’d actually agreed with me for once.

“Oh? It’s not every day that we see eye to eye, Sagami Shizumu!” I exclaimed.

Sagami was a pretty boy who I wasn’t *friends* with, but our relationship was something close enough that you couldn’t tell the difference even if you squinted. I always liked to say that we were on the same wavelength but had irreconcilably different tastes. Could it be, though, that I’d finally managed to pound an appreciation for the things I loved into his thick skull?

“Some phrasings really *do* have a certain something to them that the more basic versions just don’t capture, don’t they? Like ‘shooting rope’ or ‘blowing a load.’”

Sagami gave me one of his trademark hottie smiles. I gaped at him in deathly silence.

"Can't forget 'sowing your seed' or 'descending into depravity' either," he carried on. "Ah, but 'gangbang' is an exception. I'm really not into stories with more than one guy getting in on the action. I'll pass on sticking it into a hole some other guy was just using, thank you very much!"

"…"

"Hmm? What's wrong, Andou? Why the sour face?"

"It's nothing," I sighed, then attempted to change the topic. "By the way, y'know how some people get all pedantic about how it doesn't make sense that the bad guys in shonen manga explain their powers to the heroes? I think that's a pretty lousy nitpick, myself."

"Hmm."

"When you proclaim your power's function for all to hear, you're demonstrating to the world that you have the utmost of pride and confidence in your ability, and you're showing your opponent the respect they deserve! It's like how generals in the Sengoku era would shout out all their achievements before they charged into battle. Keeping how your power works secret and taking your enemy down without them ever finding out what's happening's just, I dunno... It doesn't even count as a supernatural battle, as far as I'm concerned."

"I know what you mean. Sometimes having characters explain what's going on can be a critical tool to build up a story's action."

"Oh, you *do* get where I'm coming from! Nice!"

"People nitpick eroge about that stuff all the time too. Like, they go on and on about how nobody *actually* says stuff like 'I can feel you twitching inside me!' and 'Ahh, your hot white sticky stuff's all over me!' like they do in the sex scenes in those games. They always whine about how the writers should stop putting lines like that in, but they just don't get it! It's hot *because* nobody would ever say something like that in real life! Don't you think?"

"…"

"It makes you think, like, 'Oh, wow, she's so uncontrollably horny it's reduced her to saying stuff like *that?!*' It really helps bring the energy level up. Right, Andou?"

"…Sure." Then I changed the topic again. "So, uhh, backing up a minute. About the whole 'descending into depravity' thing: personally, I prefer using 'plummeting' for that concept. It's got a certain *something* to it that 'descending' just doesn't capture. Like, it carries a sense of despair—a sense of sinking into the depths of darkness from whence there can be no return!"

"Yeah, you've got a point there. After all, if you're gonna talk a girl into plumbing the depths of depravity with you, better to make her plummet all the way down into a pleasure so intense she'll never return to her former self," Sagami answered with another of those truly exceptional smiles.

“Okay, that’s it! I’m *done*!” I shouted, leaping up out of my chair. I couldn’t hold my indignation back for even a second longer. “Why, *why* do you have to steer the conversation back in that direction *each* and *every* friggin’ time?! Why must you keep shoehorning your pervert crap into my aesthetic musings?!”

“Excuse me? Considering that *you’ve* been steering the conversation toward your chuuni nonsense at every opportunity, I don’t think you have a leg to stand on,” Sagami snorted derisively.

I clicked my tongue with irritation and sighed. “I can’t believe I was stupid enough to feel like I could relate to you for even a second.”

“Hah! I counter that claim with Mirror Force!”

“Mwa ha ha, too easy! Reveal face-down card: Remove Trap!”

“Too bad, Andou. Remove Trap isn’t a Quick-Play spell card, so you can’t use it to counter a Trap Card.”

“Oh, shut up! It works in the manga—Marik and Yugi do it all the time!”

“Hey, Andou?” said Sagami, abruptly cutting off the flow of the conversation. He spoke in a low, slow tone, almost as if he was trying to send me a warning. “We’re never going to see eye to eye.”

He stared at me, and I returned the gesture, fixing my gaze on his piercingly clear eyes. “Yeah. We won’t,” I spat, then flopped back down into my chair.

Every once in a while, Sagami made one of those weird, unspeakably ominous expressions. This wasn’t exactly anything new, though every time he did it, I had to think of how weird it was to see a guy as good-looking as him making a face like that. It was like he was glaring *through* me—like he was carefully observing my every motion through his strained, unnatural expression, which was paradoxically as detached as it was invasive.

“By the way, I’ve been curious about something ever since this morning,” said Sagami, once again dropping back into his usual, casual tone and glancing out the classroom’s door. “Don’t you think Tomoyo’s acting strangely today?”

“Tomoyo is? Really?”

“Yeah. I noticed her standing around by the entryway this morning, and she was glaring at her cell phone with, like...a *really* serious look on her face, as best as I could tell.”

“She was probably just reading a text or something, right?”

“Nah. She wasn’t reading—I could tell. Her eyes weren’t moving at all. Plus, she only looked for a moment before she put the phone away again.”

Sagami went on to explain that she’d pulled her phone from her pocket, glanced at its screen, then put it away again just as quickly. Not just once, though—she went through the same process less than a minute later, and again soon after.

“So that got me curious, and I decided to go take a look into class 3’s room during a break between classes. And wouldn’t you know it, she was still at it with her phone.”

“Checking her phone over and over, huh? That would mean… Hmm.”

“She’s probably checking to see if she has any new messages. That’s my best guess, anyway.”

Hmm. That would explain it, I guess. It begs the question of who she’s waiting for a message from, though. And eagerly waiting, at that.

“I’d rather not even consider this, but you don’t think…she has a boyfriend, does she…?” asked Sagami, the color draining from his face.

“Wait, why are *you* going pale over this?”

“What are you, stupid?! Don’t you even care that Tomoyo’s in danger of becoming used goods?!”

“Quit shouting at me, and quit looking so *serious* while you do it! And why the hell can’t you see girls as anything other than sex objects?! You barely even *know* Tomoyo!”

“What can I say? I like her, so of course I care,” Sagami said nonchalantly.

My jaw just about hit the floor. “Seriously?”

“Oh, sorry. That was a pretty misleading way of putting it. I don’t mean I’m in *love* with her or anything like that.”

“O-Oh, okay, I get it. You mean you like her as, like, a person?”

“No, I like her as a sex object.”

“Oh my god, you are *actual* gutter scum, I swear!”

“Excuse me, rude! Let the record show I don’t intend to *do* anything to her at all. Well, not in the real world, anyway. I’ll mess her up real good in my mind.”

“I’m starting to feel bad for calling you gutter scum, actually. Feels like I’m giving scum a bad name.”

“That doesn’t just apply to Tomoyo, by the way. I consider any good-looking girl around her teens to be a valid target for my sexual desires. I don’t even know how many times I’ve whacked it to all the other literary club members.”

“Stop lusting after my clubmates, you freak!”

“Huh? You’re saying you *haven’t*, Andou?”

“Wha?! I, ah, gah!” I stammered, more tongue-tied than I’d ever been before. “*Anyway*, back to the point! We were talking about Tomoyo acting weird, right?”

“Right… We were, yeah. That *was* the main topic.”

How did we drift so far off the point in such a weird direction, anyway? Rhetorical question; of course, it was Sagami’s fault. Can’t he just transfer schools, already? Preferably to a boys’ school in a totally different world populated exclusively by beast people.

Not that it even mattered, really. I didn’t need *him* to tell me that Tomoyo had been acting strangely.

After lunch that same day, I made my way toward the vending machine by the school store to buy a can of black coffee. I’d been making a habit of

showing off the fact that I *only* drank my coffee black ever since I started high school, and it was practically part of my daily routine by that point. I figured it was probably getting close to the right time for my efforts to start bearing fruit. Surely at least half of the girls in my class were thinking something along the lines of "Andou only ever drinks his coffee black, doesn't he? He's so mature and mysterious!"

Mwa ha ha! Yes, indeed: real men drink their coffee black! The likes of MAX Coffee shall never disgrace my refined palate!

"Man, though," I muttered as I took a sip, "black coffee sure is gross." The flavor profile just didn't suit me on a fundamental level. I mean, come on, it's so *bitter*!

Hatoko always told me that if I thought it was so nasty, I should stop drinking it, but that's just not how it works. I wanted to be a black coffee drinker! And, more importantly, I wanted everyone to *know* I was a black coffee drinker!

"Guess this is just one of those trials that real men have to endure... Mwa ha ha! I am not wont to turn down a challenge! I'll keep drinking that sinful elixir, stained with the jet-black hue of the apocalypse itself, to the *bitter* end!"

My determination renewed, I strode down the hallway with overflowing confidence, only to catch sight of Tomoyo as she walked out of her classroom. She hadn't noticed me, though, and didn't even glance in my direction as she sped off on her way.

I couldn't see her well enough to be absolutely certain, but I could've sworn she was fiddling with her phone in her pocket as she left. Technically speaking, using your cell phone on school grounds was against the rules, by the way, but basically none of the students paid attention to that regulation, and the teachers weren't particularly uptight about it as long as we weren't using them during our lessons. It was essentially a rule in name only.

As Tomoyo turned a corner, I caught a glimpse of her face. That brief look was enough for me to tell that she was deep in thought about something. Brooding, even. I hesitated for just a moment, then found myself following along after her before I knew it.

What if Sagami was right and she really is waiting for her boyfriend to contact her? What would I do then...? I mean, it's not like whether or not Tomoyo's dating someone is any of my business... But then, why do I feel so weirdly uneasy...?

Wait, what am I thinking? How could Tomoyo of all people possibly get a boyfriend?! Who'd want to date a girl who's a great listener, and super considerate, and complains all the time but somehow ends up being surprisingly sociable in spite of all the grousing, and acts all calm and cool but is secretly super cute when she smiles, and...huh? Wait a second... I can't think of anything bad to say about her! Could it be that Tomoyo's actually an incredibly nice girl, through and through?!

As I was being struck by a sudden and shocking revelation, Tomoyo opened the emergency exit and stepped out onto the fire escape. I pulled myself together, then snuck out after her.

The early summer breeze gently brushed my skin as I stepped outside. Tomoyo was just a little ways away down the staircase, already fiddling with her cell phone. I stuck to the shadows by the wall and spent a moment quietly observing her. Her expression was incredibly serious as she stared at her phone's screen. She looked desperate, or cornered—like she was at her wit's end, maybe. Then, after about three minutes of silent staring, Tomoyo suddenly started yelling.

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Oh my god, *yesss*!" she shouted. She usually made a concentrated effort to play it cool, and it was really rare to see her act *this* openly happy about something.

Tomoyo grinned gleefully, literally jumping with joy. Everything about how she was acting made it clear that she was ecstatic, and I had a *lot* of questions. I hesitated for a moment longer, then resolved myself to just go ahead and ask.

"Hey!" I called out to her.

"Hyeeek?!" Tomoyo shrieked, jumping again in a totally different sort of way, "Wha... A-An, A-A-Andou, wh-what're you...?"

"That's some major stuttering you've got going on, there. Anyway, I, uh... I noticed you staring a hole in your phone earlier, so I thought something might've happened and decided to follow you."

"S-So, you were watching the whole time?"

I nodded. Tomoyo spun about to face away from me, then shrieked in a piercingly shrill falsetto. "Aaagh, come on! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Freak! Stalker!"

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" I sighed. "What were you so excited about, anyway?"

I didn't *really* think she'd answer me, but at that point, it wasn't like asking could make things any worse than they already were. Considering how mad she was about my admittedly stalkerish behavior, I figured the odds were very high she'd be too stubborn to tell me anything...

"Huh...? Umm, r-right, yeah. If you're that curious, I guess I could tell you."

...but lo and behold, her rage faded away almost instantly. She was even going to tell me what the deal was, astonishingly enough. *Actually, it sort of seems like she really,* really *wants to talk about it?*

"Oh, but first—do you know my pen name, Andou?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I do."

Tomoyo was an aspiring writer, and she'd already picked out a pen name for herself. I'd happened to steal a glance at her idea notebook at one point in the past, and had inadvertently learned her chosen pseudonym in the process: Yugami Hizumi.

“Now that you mention it, I’ve been meaning to say something about that for a while now.”

“What?”

“Tomoyo, your pen name’s *stupid* cool!”

Instantly, her face flushed scarlet. My praise must’ve touched an embarrassment nerve.

“Huh? N-No way! I mean…really?”

“Yeah, really! It’s as good as a pen name could get! ‘Yugami’ and ‘Hizumi’ are cool names in and of themselves, but they’re also both words for ‘distortion,’ right? You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Right, exactly!” said Tomoyo, suddenly shifting from bashfulness to excitement. She switched right back again a second later, though. Must’ve been embarrassed about raising her voice. “I-I’m surprised you caught onto that.”

“Are you kidding? I noticed right away!”

The Japanese language has a number of words for “distortion,” with slight differences in nuance, and among them, “yugami,” “hizumi,” and “ibitsu” are all written using the same base character. It’s one of those magical characters that’s cool no matter *how* context dictates you read it! Even better, if you break it down into its component radicals, you can turn it into the word for “injustice,” which makes it, like, a *thousand* times more cool!

The best part, though, was that Tomoyo didn’t *actually* use that character itself in her pen name at all! No, it was made up of totally different characters that were pronounced the same way!

“‘Yugami’: a playful god. ‘Hizumi’: clearest crimson. The ‘distortion’ nuance lingers in the background, implied but never stated… Holy *crap*, is that ever a pen name! Seriously, it sends shivers down my spine!”

“H-Hey, stop it, okay…? D-D-Don’t compliment me like that, it’s weird! B-But, umm, th-thanks,” mumbled Tomoyo. She was squatting down, covering her face with her hands, and I could tell her embarrassment was approaching critical mass.

I, however, wasn’t even close to done complimenting her! *Yugami Hizumi*, seriously! I could’ve spent at *least* another hour straight explaining what made the name so special! A name like that doesn’t even *need* context—it’s just that good! Once again, Tomoyo had proven herself to have an incredible knack for that sort of thing.

“W-Well, anyway, all I needed to know was whether or not you remembered the name. Look at this next,” said Tomoyo after she finally shook off her shame. She held out her phone, and I took a look. For some reason, a long list of names was displayed on the screen.

“What’s this?”

“The first-round judging results for a light novel writing competition. They just got announced today.”

Hmm. In other words, these are all pen names? I was vaguely familiar with that sort of contest, and knew that they tended to be split up into at least three or so rounds of judging. Clearing the first round meant you'd broken through the first barrier on the road to becoming an author, more or less.

"Out of 534 applicants in total, 127 passed the first round, huh? They pruned the list down to just about a fifth of its original size, then," I observed.

"Right," confirmed Tomoyo. "That varies a bit from publisher to publisher, though. This publisher just happens to always shoot for a second round that's about a fifth of the size of the first one."

A one in five chance of making it through didn't sound that terribly difficult, but on the other hand, when I thought about the four hundred and something people who'd been dropped in the first round, it struck me as sort of incredible. I skimmed through the list of pen names, appreciating the wide variety of monikers people had chosen for themselves. Some of them were so mundane I figured they weren't pen names at all, while some were outlandishly cool, and others were straight-up memes.

Then, suddenly, my eyes landed upon one pen name that caught my attention above all the others: Yugami Hizumi.

"Huh...? Wait—huuuh? *Your* pen name's on here...?"

But, that would mean... I looked up at Tomoyo, and she gave me a timid nod.

"Y-You passed?"

"Yeah. Just the first round, though," she clarified. She was doing her best to sound dispassionate about it, but a grin was quickly breaking through her poker face.

"Th-That's amazing... I mean, like, that's *amazing*! Holy crap, Tomoyo! Amazing!" I stammered. This had all come from so far out of left field for me that I ended up completely tongue tied. I just kept saying "amazing" over and over, which wasn't exactly the most erudite way of expressing how impressed I was.

"I-It's not *amazing* or anything," said Tomoyo. "I still have a long, long way to go from here. There's the second and third rounds of judging, for one thing, and only ten people out of the whole batch actually win anything in the end."

She was really doing her best to play her achievement down, but she couldn't disguise how happy she was. Her tone of voice was noticeably higher than usual. I couldn't blame her either. She'd told me once that she'd entered these competitions twice before and had been dropped in the first round both times, so this was her first time actually making it through to round two. The little happy dance she'd done before realizing I was here suddenly made a lot more sense.

"So, that's why you looked so intense when you checked your phone this morning? You were waiting for the results?"

“Yeah…but wait, did I really look *that* intense?”

“It was an ‘I’m neck-deep in debt and have to flee the country in the middle of the night’ sort of look, I’d say,” I replied in complete earnestness.

Tomoyo hung her head awkwardly, then explained that she hadn’t actually been waiting for a message. In truth, she’d been repeatedly refreshing the contest website. The publisher had announced that the first round’s results would be going out today, but they’d never actually specified what time they’d be posted.

I noted that she could’ve just waited until she went home and checked the results then at her leisure, and she retorted that she just *had* to know as soon as possible. And so, she ended up checking the site every time she had the slightest opportunity. *Must just be one of those aspiring author things.*

“Hmm… Wait a second,” I said as a certain name sprung to mind. It was a name I wouldn’t forget any time soon: Amaterasu Yamato. “T-Tomoyo…? Just out of curiosity, what did you name the main character of the story you passed the first round with?”

I couldn’t prevent a slight note of fear from coming through in my question, and Tomoyo cocked her head in confusion. “Takemikazuchi Zakuro. Why?”

Silence descended. It’s so weird. I really like Tomoyo, and I feel like we’re really on the same page when it comes to our sense of aesthetics most of the time, but the way she names her characters is such a wild and extreme exception to that rule. They’re so extravagantly cool, they end up sounding lame. So stylish they fall out of style before her pen leaves the paper.

“Anyway,” I said, changing the subject, “this is great! We’ve gotta celebrate somehow!”

“Wha— No, stop it! I can’t celebrate passing the *first round*! That’d be humiliating!” shouted Tomoyo, waving her hands in the air. “Don’t tell any of the other literary club people either, okay? Bragging about something this minor would just make me look ridiculous!”

Hmm. I mean…I guess she has a point. I didn’t completely agree with her, but it did feel like celebrating now would be jumping the gun a little. It’d be like throwing a party after you passed some standardized test but before you actually got accepted into a college.

“Okay, well…let me treat you to a meal or something, at the very least,” I offered after a moment’s thought.

“Y-You don’t have to do that! It’s fine, really.”

“Don’t be like that! This is a big deal, and I wanna congratulate you. Plus, I *did* sorta go all stalker on you and expose something you were trying to keep secret, so I figure I should probably do something to apologize.”

Tomoyo paused. “Oh…? Well, if you’re that set on it, then I guess I’ll take you up on that.”

“Anything in particular you want me to treat you to?”

“Umm…ah! How about a mille-feuille from Mild?”

Mild was the name of a local café right by the station closest to our school. I'd never been there myself, but from everything I'd heard, their cakes and coffee were pretty darn decent.

"Okay, sounds good to me! Wanna go today?"

"Ah, no, today won't work," replied Tomoyo. "They only serve their mille-feuille at lunchtime."

"Oh, got it... In that case, how 'bout Saturday?"

"Sounds good. I'll check in with the others and see if that works for them. We're inviting Chifuyu too, right?"

"What? No, no, wait a second! Why're you planning on bringing everyone else along? Aren't you keeping this whole passing the first round thing a secret?"

"Ah, right!" Tomoyo hesitated. "So, uhh...what should we do, then?"

"What else?" I replied. "The two of us can just go on our own, duh."

☆

"...He's late," I muttered, just barely loud enough to hear myself.

It was Saturday, and I was in a convenience store by the station we'd decided to meet up at, my face half-buried in that week's copy of *Jump*. The familiar sense of indignation at being forced to wait around for someone who wasn't as punctual as me was beginning to bud within my chest.

We'd arranged to meet up at eleven in the morning, and at present it was eleven o'clock, right on the dot. That meant that Andou wasn't *really* late yet, honestly, but I'd already been waiting for him for close to an hour. Standing around for that long makes you want to grumble at whoever you're waiting for, whether or not it's reasonable of you.

Since I was so excited—I mean, since I didn't want to be late...I'd left home a bit early and arrived at our meeting place *way* earlier than I should've. Yeah, I didn't want to be late. That was the only reason, really.

And, well, that's how I ended up standing around and reading a manga magazine that I'd already bought days beforehand, and unsurprisingly, I was getting pretty bored with it. I even ended up reading all the way through the advertisements at the end of the magazine and learning all sorts of stuff about crap I couldn't have cared less about, like how much those boobie mouse pads cost. More than you'd expect, apparently.

I returned the magazine to the shelf, then paused to take a quick look at my outfit. I'd chosen to wear a slightly shorter skirt than I'd usually go for, and I was sort of starting to regret the decision.

Th-This is fine, right? I don't look weird in this outfit, do I? It doesn't make me look like I'm trying too hard, does it? I mean...it's not like this is a d-date, or anything... Andou just insisted on celebrating, so I had no choice but to show up... It being just the two of us just sort of happened, that's all! And guys and girls going out together platonically isn't weird at all, in this day and age!

Ahh, crap! I could feel myself starting to sweat, so I scooted over to stand directly in line with the store's air conditioner. That's when a thought

struck me—I'd agonized over my own clothes for quite some time, but what would *Andou* be wearing? What sort of casual clothes would a guy like him pick out?

I pondered the question for a moment…and a chill ran down my spine. I'd never seen him wear anything other than his school uniform, but it was hard to picture someone with as deep-seated a case of chuunibyou as him picking out anything even remotely decent.

What would I do if he showed up and was all bandages and fingerless gloves all over the place? Or if his clothes had a bunch of loud, pointless chains all over them, or if he showed up wearing some weirdly traditional getup complete with wooden sandals? How do you react when the person you're meeting arrives looking like an especially avant-garde Stand User?

"Hey, Tomoyo! I guess I'm a little late, huh? Sorry 'bout that."

A boy's voice—a very familiar one—rang out behind me, and two conflicting emotions rushed through my mind. On the one hand, there was happiness: *He's* finally *shown up*. On the other hand, there was apprehension: *Oh god, what could he be wearing?*

"See, I would've been on time, but on the way here *they* launched a sneak…ah, I mean, I didn't say anything! I overslept, that's all!"

"Spare me the belabored-superhero-who-secretly-fights-the-forces-of-evil act, thanks," I countered, as always, then whispered a silent, internal prayer as I turned around. *Please,* please*, let him be wearing something only moderately chuuni! I'll consider myself lucky if he's* just *wearing all black!*

When I finally got a look at his clothes, though, I was stunned. I couldn't believe my eyes, even, and had to rub them and take another long look before I was convinced I wasn't seeing things.

A summery, light-colored polo shirt. Pants rolled up to three-quarter length, and a casual pair of sneakers. A few accessories, but not too many, and nothing tasteless by any stretch of the imagination.

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I was speechless. He... He... He looks normal! He looks so normal, I can hardly believe it! Heck, he actually...looks a little cool, even...

"H-Hey, Tomoyo? What's with the inspection you're giving me?" asked Andou. "Something weird about my clothes?"

"I'm surprised that they're *not* weird, actually," I replied.

Seriously? Is this how he dresses on his days off? This is practically the polar opposite of chuuni fashion!

"I was terrified you were going to show up in some ridiculous edgelord ensemble," I explained. Who could've possibly imagined he'd be dressed normally, and *fashionably*, at that?

"Ah...well, y'know, the thing is," Andou began, scratching his head awkwardly, "my family sorta banned me from buying my own clothes."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, so my sister picks out all my stuff for me. It's really embarrassing, honestly! What kind of high schooler wears clothes his family picks out?"

I was already aware that Andou had an older sister, so that part wasn't news to me, at least. I guess that means she's the one who coordinated his whole outfit today? She's got a pretty good eye for fashion, in that case. She must've taken his looks, the recent trends, and even the season into consideration when she put it together, and I have to admit, it turned out really nicely.

"But, wait—you're *banned* from buying clothes...? What the hell did you do to make *that* a thing?"

"Who knows? Your guess is as good as mine. It sucks too—I'd rather go for something more dark, stylish, and fashion-conscious."

"Hmm. And what would that look like?"

"Well, to start with, it'd have some chains—"

"Right, okay, I get the picture." My utmost gratitude to the Andou household. This man should never ever be allowed to buy his own clothes.

"Oh, I know a good example!" Andou continued. "Y'know how Kiryuu dresses? That's pretty much my fashion ideal!"

"That's the sort of style you can only pull off if you're already naturally hot," I sighed. My brother was the sort of moron who'd wear a black trench coat in the height of summer. He'd always had a pretty eccentric fashion sense, but since he actually managed to pull it off somehow, nobody ever called him out on it.

"Come to think of it, this is actually my first time seeing you dressed casually too," noted Andou.

I twitched, then stiffened up. *S-S-So, what's he gonna say? I look normal, right? Nothing's out of place, right?* I made a desperate effort to keep my inner turmoil from showing on my face as I waited for him to give me his impressions. Finally, after what seemed like an age, he spoke up again.

"Okay! Should we get going?"

I stared at him. Really? Nothing? You're just gonna drop the "Oh, I've never seen you in casual clothes before" line and leave it at that? If you're gonna bring it up at all, shouldn't you, I dunno, say literally anything about how I look, dammit?! Like how it's weird seeing me dressed this way, but feels kinda fresh?! Or how I look c-cute?!

"Hey, what's the hold up, Tomoyo? Let's get going!"

"*Fine*!" I huffed, then walked right past him without sparing him so much as a glance.

Mild was a café with a reputation for its pleasant, relaxed atmosphere. Its decor was themed around a cream-colored palette, and the whole place gave an impression that I could only describe as, well, mild. I'd been here several times before, but apparently, this would be Andou's first visit.

"Hey, Tomoyo?"

"Yeah?"

"How many times do you have to visit a café before you can start ordering 'the usual'?"

"Don't know, don't care."

We sat across from each other at a table near the back of the store, bantering idiotically as we perused the menu. I already knew what I'd be ordering, of course, so I was just waiting for Andou to pick something.

"Hey, Tomoyo, take a look at this," he said, pointing to a portion of the menu that read "Couples' Discount! Order two cake sets for 200 yen off! Today only!"

"Let's go for it," Andou casually continued. "We could probably pass ourselves off as a couple, right?"

I let out a squeak and felt my face flush. "A-Are you kidding me?! No way in hell would I ever—"

"Shh! The whole café's gonna hear you! And c'mon, what's the big deal? We just have to pretend!"

"N-No way!" I repeated, a little more emphatically than I meant to. I couldn't stop myself from getting a bit worked up. Pretending to be a couple with Andou? No way I'd want to do that! Or, I mean, I wouldn't want to pretend about that sort of thing in general, I guess...

"Hmm...gotcha," said Andou. "If you really don't want to, that's fine. This is your celebration, after all."

He backed down without putting up a fight at all, and I instantly started feeling guilty. That's right—the whole reason we're here today is because he wanted to congratulate me. I'm the one getting treated, so I guess that might've been sort of selfish of me.

"F-Fine," I said after a short pause.

"Huh?"

"I said it's fine! We can pretend to be a c-couple..."

"Oh, great!"

"But we're just pretending, okay?! It's an act!"

"Yeah, I know, I know."

Okay…this is pretty obnoxious. How can he be so calm and composed about doing something like this? It feels like I'm the only one reading into stuff, and it's making me look like a moron.

I pushed the call button on the table, our waiter soon arrived, and we placed our orders. Unfortunately, I couldn't stop myself from blushing again as Andou explained that we wanted to use the couple's discount.

"Oh god, bitter! How is straight espresso *this* bitter?!" exclaimed Andou with a disgusted scowl. Our drinks had arrived first, and it only took him a single sip to reach a conclusion about his.

"Don't say I didn't warn you. Properly made espresso's just like that."

The real stuff's made with specialized tools that put the coffee grounds under high pressure and extract all the flavor from it in a really brief period of time, which makes it *way* stronger than any drip coffee you could ever order.

"And you ordered a doppio, of all things," I sighed. Doppio means "double" in Italian, and a doppio espresso's brewed using twice the amount of coffee grounds as an ordinary one. In other words, they're *incredibly* bitter.

"W-Well, yeah, of course I did! It has twice the beans, but it's barely any more expensive! I figured ordering one of those would be more economical," explained Andou.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Plus, the word 'doppio' brings *JoJo Part 5* to mind, so I just couldn't resist."

"That's…okay, yeah, that's actually fair." I couldn't argue with that one. *JoJo* was my first association with the word too. "Anyway, here. Put some milk and sugar in that thing."

"N-No, but, I drink my coffee black!"

"Sure you do, chuuni-boy." I rolled my eyes and ignored Andou's protest as I dumped plenty of milk and sugar into his coffee. It ended up turning it into a sort of janky caffe latte, but I knew for a fact that it would suit his tastes better than what he'd ordered. He had quite the sweet tooth, after all.

You're not even supposed to drink espresso black in the first place, really! Like, it's not like you *can't* if you really want to, but apparently, the authentic Italian way of drinking it involves putting a bunch of sugar in. I've heard that almost nobody drinks it black over there. The Italian style of coffee that Gyro made in Part 6 involved putting a bunch of sugar in too.

"F-For your information, I could've drunk it just fine the way I ordered it!" groused Andou as he took his coffee cup back. "Man, why'd you have to butt in and ruin my…*dang*, this is good! It's *so* much better sweet!"

Dealing with terminal chuunis is such a pain sometimes, I swear.

“Maybe I should’ve just bitten the bullet and ordered a drink I actually like for once?” Andou mumbled to himself. “But, I dunno—‘caffe latte’ and ‘caramel macchiato’ just don’t deliver when it comes to chuuni power. You really can’t beat ‘espresso doppio’ by that standard…”

He was clearly stuck in an extended psychological conflict between his taste in drinks and his taste in media. Andou was a terminal chuuni if I’d ever seen one, and one of the particularly obnoxious types, at that. *That said, though…‘chuuni power’?*

“You’ve changed, haven’t you?” I observed. “You used to react so violently to the word ‘chuuni’ it was like you were allergic to it or something, but you’ve been saying it yourself all over the place lately.” It almost felt like he’d reached an understanding with the fact that he himself was a chuuni.

Andou’s eyes widened ever so slightly, but only for a moment. “Yeah, I guess,” he admitted with a chuckle. “I think I’ve said this before, but I really don’t like the word when it’s used as a pejorative. Like, what’s a good example… Okay, take the word ‘voluptuous,’ for instance.”

“*Voluptuous*? Where are you going with this?”

“I couldn’t think of a better example! Just hear me out, okay? So, ‘voluptuous’ isn’t a *bad* word, right? It’s a word that people use to describe girls’ figures in a positive way, right? But if you walked up to a girl and called her ‘voluptuous’ out of nowhere, it wouldn’t sound like a compliment. Hell, it’d be the opposite, if anything.”

He wasn’t wrong about that, anyway. I don’t think there’s a woman out there who’d be happy if you called her “voluptuous” apropos of nothing.

“So, the same word can be a compliment or an insult, depending on how you use it and who you use it on. Well, I think chuuni’s the same way—or, really, I think it’s fine to treat it the same way,” Andou continued with a smile. “People say I’m a chuuni, and, well…they’re probably right. But that doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing. The world might use chuuni as a pejorative or an insult, but *I* use it as a compliment! After all, being a chuuni’s the coolest thing ever!”

The look that he gave me was packed full of the purest of sincerity. His gaze was innocent, without the slightest hint of maliciousness, but also somewhat precarious—as if there was a hint of instability to wherever he was coming from with all this.

I, meanwhile, was at a loss for words. The similarities were just too striking. I couldn’t help but see a link between Andou and the man who shared half of my genes.

“That’s almost exactly the same thing Hajime told me once.”

Chapter 6: Chuunversion

“Chuunibyou isn’t a sickness—it’s a way of life.”

Now, what sort of absolute mess of a man would ever possibly choose to live a life centered around a philosophy like *that*?

That’s a rhetorical question, of course. The answer is obvious: it could only be my ever-unhinged iconoclast of an older brother, Kiryuu Hajime. Or as he’d prefer to be called, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First.

Hajime wasn’t your everyday chuuni. No, he was a chuuni with *convictions*. That actually makes it sort of hard to come up with specific examples of his various chuuni episodes—there are just way too many to choose from. If I had to pick just one to represent the lot of them, though, something he once told me comes to mind.

“I believe that most individuals’ very first brush with a chuuni-adjacent impulse occurs when they first learn the meaning and origins of their own name,” he explained.

This happened about three years ago, when I was in middle school. Hajime, by logical extension, was a high schooler. We were in his room at the time—I’d wandered in to borrow a volume of manga from him, and I was sprawled out on his bed reading when he started monologuing apropos of absolutely nothing, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“What hopes and wishes for your future was your name intended to convey? For what purpose were you born? Taking an interest in your own roots and origins is an inevitability of human nature…however, there’s no guarantee that the answer you find will satisfy those expectations. ‘You’re our second son, so we put the character for second into your name.’ ‘We named you after a character from a manga.’ ‘We ran out of time and picked a name on impulse.’ I think most people are dissatisfied by their name’s origins on some level.”

This sort of sermon was more or less business as usual for Hajime. Proselytizing his chuuni manifesto was a full-time occupation for him. I’ve spent a decent bit of time reflecting on my childhood, and at some point along the way, I started thinking of those moments as his chuunversion sessions. Rolling with that terminology, you could say I was subjected to intensive chuunversion pretty much all throughout middle school.

“The moment you realize that your name’s nothing special—that it has no deeper meaning, no connection to some grand destiny—you have two options. You can give in and admit to yourself that mundanity really *is* all the world has to offer. *Or*, you can *deny* it. You can reject the worthless reality that faces you down and strive to uncover the *real* truth behind it all. The choice you make in that moment determines the course of the rest of your life.”

Hajime paused to give me a *look*. His sunglasses, their circular lenses small enough that I always wanted to ask if they really had any effect on his

vision at all, slid down the bridge of his nose just far enough to give me a glimpse of his eyes. His eyes were heterochromatic, one crimson and one jet black (thanks to his colored contacts). He wore an eyepatch pretty often back when he was in middle school, but I guess his sense of style shifted when he got into high school because he stopped wearing it altogether. The round sunglasses were his current signature accessory.

"So, then—what's the origin of your name, *Endless Paradox*?" he asked, turning his monologue into a conversation.

"'Tomo,' as in the golden light of dawn, piercing through the dark of night and dispelling the gloom within which a life, a 'yo,' is imprisoned. Thusly: Tomoyo. Such is the origin of my name," I replied.

Actually, no. No, I didn't. I didn't reply at all. I said nothing of the sort. I have no clue who miss says-the-word-"thusly"-in-a-casual-sentence over there is, but she's *definitely* not me! I deny *everything*!

"And what of yours, O brother of mine?"

Gee, who could this cringey-ass little girl who calls her sibling 'O brother of mine' possibly be?! I just! don't! know! *Gaaaaaaaaaaah, for the love of god, somebody please kill me! Or better yet, go back in time and kill past-me!*

"Bwa ha ha!" Hajime cackled, intensely amused by my suicidal-impulse-inducingly excruciating answer. "The layers of meaning packed within my true name are not so easily shared. No, not even with my very own sister! Instead, I shall share with you the origins of my Earthly appellation, a poor substitute though it may be. 'Kiryuu Hajime' is the name given to me by the woman who birthed me into this realm…Kiryuu Rei. From Rei, 'zero,' rises Hajime, 'one.' That's what she told me when I was a child."

Kiryuu Rei. Hajime's mother, a woman with whom I shared no relation. I'd only met her once, myself. My memory of her face was stored away deep within my heart—a single image in my mind's most old and decrepit photo album. I remember her looking kind, yet at the same time, somehow frail. Fleeting.

"It's rare for you to speak of your motherly sire, O brother of mine."

Please, I'm begging you, just shut up, O me of my memories! Stop forcing yourself to use complicated words! You're not even good at it! This is supposed to be a serious bit, so let the conversation be the focus here!

"It feels like a slipshod name in some ways, but there's a sense of pessimism to it as well that I don't mind," Hajime continued. "I wouldn't call it a bad origin for a name…but it's not enough. It's not even close to chuuni enough to quench my thirst," he concluded, then let loose with his distinctive, barking laugh.

Looking back on it now, I see the whole conversation in a new light. Now that I've graduated from middle school, now that I've left my chuuni days behind me, I can tell. Hajime was at all times, under all circumstances, self-aware regarding his chuunibyou.

He knew that the world would label his ideas and actions as ‘cringe.’ He acknowledged that fact and accepted it. He was perfectly aware that society would deny him, scorn him, and reject him—yet still, he chose to fight back, to oppose society and walk his own path to the bitter end.

At this point, though, I have to ask myself a pretty basic question: does self-aware chuunibyou still count as chuunibyou at all? Isn’t a *lack* of self-awareness a fundamental element of what makes somebody a chuuni? Chuunibyou’s a constant, self-perpetuating loop of mistaking cringe for cool and digging yourself deeper and deeper into your own misapprehension. The moment you realize what’s happening—the moment you perceive your own cringiness—you can never go back. You’re not a chuuni anymore, and it’s time to move on.

That’s how it went for me, anyway, but I think it applies overall. As you grow older, you reach the understanding that you’re not cool at all. That you’re just a plain old chuuni. This world *forces* you to realize it, bearing down on you with the power and inevitability of an oncoming avalanche.

All that said, even now that I’ve gained self-awareness, I still love chuuni-riffic novels and stuff like that. I just draw a much clearer line between them and the rest of my life, unlike how I was back in middle school. I came to realize that all of that stuff really was just my thing, not everybody else’s, and that changed everything.

But Hajime and Andou are different.

They’re self-aware of their chuuni nature. They acknowledge that they’re cringey. But when confronted with those truths, when asked why they don’t change, they strike back. “Why would I?” they ask. “Who’s to say I’m in the wrong? Maybe this mess of a world that derides me as cringe is the one with the wrong idea!”

Maybe, deep down, on some level, they actually *enjoy* being judged. Maybe that sense of persecution, the sense that the whole world is against them, makes them feel *superior* to the world at large, not inferior. They’re the living, breathing personifications of the idea that not being like everyone else makes you cool.

Or maybe it’s simpler than that. Maybe their chuuni levels are just so high that they *can’t* move on even after they’ve achieved self-awareness.

Kiryuu Hajime. Andou Jurai. The beastly reserves of chuuni potential that slumber within those two men will forever prevent them from moving on and embracing mundanity.

“Wait, Kiryuu said the same thing? For real? That’s so cool!” said Andou. He smiled at me from across the table, but there was a trace of envy in his gaze. “I’ve only met him once, but man, I *really* like that guy. Mwa ha ha—surely, in another time, in another era, the two of us conquered many a bloodsoaked battlefield as brothers in arms!”

I didn’t reply. Every once in a while, when he got like this, I felt a strange and inexplicable sense of fear.

Hey, Andou. All those ridiculous chuuni declarations you make all the time—you are just messing around, right? You act like a moron on purpose because that's how our relationship works and you want to keep it that way, right? Or maybe you've got more of an ordinary case of chuunibyou going on and you think saying stuff like that makes you cool? Or maybe…just maybe, even now, you still really, seriously believe from the bottom of your heart that you're a special, exceptional person?

I didn't want him to catch on to my anxiety, so I took great care to make sure my voice came out as naturally as possible as I replied. "Don't you go turning out like Hajime, okay?" I said, doing my best to make it sound sarcastic.

Somewhere along the way, Hajime had crossed a line. I could tell. I didn't know how, exactly, but he'd transgressed in a way he could never come back from. Andou, however, was still teetering upon the precipice, caught between his love for his commonplace everyday life and his yearning for true supernatural battles.

"Mwa ha ha," Andou laughed. I'd always been struck by how similar his laugh was to Hajime's bwa-ha-ha. "As of now, he and I walk different paths. Someday, though, the laws of causality will bring our courses together once more. That will be the moment it all begins—and the moment it all comes to an end," he declared, smiling triumphantly as he delivered one of his usual edgy mini-tirades.

Normally, this is the part where I'd call him a chuuni-boy and nitpick his act into oblivion, but that strange sense of unease was still hanging heavily over me, and I couldn't bring myself to respond at all.

Soon after, my mille-feuille arrived. It was as sweet as could be.

It was about one in the afternoon when we left the café. That seemed a little early for us to pack up and go home, so Andou and I ended up wandering over to a bookstore in the station building. It was the biggest chain bookstore to have a branch in our region, and before I knew it, we'd spent a full three hours browsing.

"Oof, jeez… Yeah, my back and legs are really starting to feel all this walking around," said Andou, stretching as we left the store. "This was fun, though."

"Yeah," I agreed after a brief pause.

In complete honesty, it *had* been fun. Like, *really* fun. I hadn't been looking for any books in particular, and I didn't find anything I felt the need to grab on impulse, but just browsing the shelves and chatting about the books we saw was the best activity a bookworm like me could ask for. This is probably something that only fellow bookworms can understand, but something about bookstores just lures me right into them, even when I have no intention of actually buying anything.

Then, of course, there's the fact that Andou and I had really similar taste in books. We got so hyped up talking about them that the hours just flew by.

Oh, god, what's wrong with me? Why is just walking around a bookstore with him so stupidly fun?

"I pretty much always come here on my own," said Andou. "Hatoko's not really much of a reader, so if I bring her along, she ends up deciding to leave if I take too long browsing."

"Yeah, same," I agreed. "I'm trying not to let my friends from school figure out that I'm into manga and light novels and stuff, so I can't exactly take them along."

"Oh, right. I almost forgot you're a closet nerd."

I frowned. "Think you could stop calling me that, thanks?"

"Huh? Wait, am I wrong?"

"I mean, no, but still..." I just don't like it when you sum up the issue in a quick and easy phrase like that.

A little over a year beforehand, I moved on from both middle school and my chuuni ways and made a fresh, clean start of things in high school. Everyone in my class thought of me as a perfectly normal girl, and none of them had any idea about my nerdy interests. So…yeah. I was a closet nerd. He couldn't have picked a better term to describe me with.

"I guess…that's why you're the only person I don't have to keep up the pretense around. You're the only one I can be my real self with," I said, barely even registering the words that spilled from my mouth. "You even figured out that I want to be an author and that I used to be a chuuni."

"That's not true, is it? Like, everyone else in the club knows all that stuff too."

"You're the only one who'd spend three hours in a bookstore with me, though, aren't you?"

"Ha ha ha! You might be right about that one."

Standing around while we talked seemed silly, so we made our way over to a nearby pedestrian area and sat down on a bench to rest our legs.

"Want something to drink?" I asked. "My treat, since you covered for me earlier and all."

"Oh? Sure, thanks. Umm…"

"You can just ask for something sweet, you know?" I jabbed.

Andou grimaced, then practically whispered, "Okay, then. Strawberry milk."

I walked over to a nearby vending machine, bought two strawberry milks, then wandered back. Andou thanked me as I passed him his drink and sat down again. As I sipped mine, though, I ended up watching him out of the corner of my eye and started feeling sort of restless. The awkward fact that the two of us had gone out together today was finally starting to sink in.

"H-Hey, Andou?" I said without thinking. I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye, so I ended up staring at my drink as I spoke instead. "So, umm…I don't have anyone else I could ask to come along with me, so you're

basically the only option... I mean, see, a book I want is going on sale the fifteenth of this month...”

I paused for a moment, taking a breath and trying to convince my heart to stop pounding, then went for it. “S-So, do you want to come along with—”

“Oh, huh—that you over there, Jurai?”

Suddenly, out of the blue, a voice cut into our conversation, cutting *me* off entirely. I looked up, shocked, only to find a remarkably attractive girl standing nearby.

She looked like she was about our age, or maybe a little older, and was wearing a long-sleeved shirt with a long, dark green skirt and a big, fluffy hat that looked like it was made from some sort of fur. Her overall look was pretty similar to a rustic sort of style that had been in fashion lately, though I wasn’t familiar enough with the style to say for sure if her outfit quite counted. It was also pretty dark in terms of its overall color palette, but her expression and tone of voice were shockingly bright and cheery in comparison.

“Knew it! It is you, Jurai! It’s really been a tick, hasn’t it? Sure didn’t expect to cross trails with you here. What’re you up to?”

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She walked right up to us, looking squarely at Andou as she rattled off a string of questions. Her dialect immediately struck me, but I couldn't pin down where it was actually from. Her tone was bright, but flat and featureless, without any of the inflection that I was used to, and her pronunciation was subtly different from how most people spoke around here as well.

"Tamaki..." muttered Andou, his eyes wide. He looked shocked to see her, so I assumed that he and this rustically dressed mystery girl—Tamaki, I guess—must have known each other. "It's been a while, yeah."

"Yup, long time, no talk! And drop me, if you haven't sprung up since the last time I saw you. Think you were a little shrimpier than me last time, right? Talk about a growth spurt!"

Andou hesitated for a moment. "When did you move back?" he finally asked.

"I didn't," she replied. "I just went to roost with my grammy and gramps for a span."

"Ah... Makes sense," said Andou with a nod. "I can tell you've been away a while. Your accent's gotten pretty wild."

"Huh? No joking? Well, that's mighty embarrassing! Can't full glean it me-wise. Is it really that over?"

"Pretty bad, yeah."

"Ah ha ha ha! Well, we can just pin it as one of my charming little quirks."

Tamaki's cheerful smile stood in contrast to Andou's unusually stiff expression. His tone of voice sounded a little strained as well. He must have noticed that I was watching him, because at that point, he changed the subject to introduce us.

"So, umm...this is Tamaki. We knew each other back in eighth grade."

In the eighth grade? That's a weirdly specific time frame, isn't it? Not "in middle school," but just in the eighth grade?

"And this is Tomoyo," he continued, looking back to Tamaki. "She's a friend from my club at school."

"Oh, a club bud? Good to meet you, Tomoyo," said Tamaki with a perfectly carefree smile.

"Y-Yeah, same," I replied, shooting up from the bench to accept her handshake.

"Always nice, making new pals!" she said, then paused. "Hmm? Don't you know your skirt's a tad too short for your fit, Tomoyo? A girl like you shouldn't be ambling around with that much skin sticking out!"

Distinct intonation aside, she sounded like a nosy old woman giving me the third degree about my clothing choices. Considering her long sleeves and skirt, I had to assume she wasn't a fan of revealing outfits on the whole.

"Ah!" Tamaki suddenly exclaimed. "Wait a tick—did you get yourself all gussied up for a date with Jurai?"

“Huh? Wha—n-no way! That’s not it at all! I-It isn’t, right, Andou?!” I shouted, spinning around to face him.

“R-Right. It’s not, I know,” replied Andou. I was really flustered, but he sounded almost absentminded.

Something felt weird about the way he was reacting. At the very least, it wasn’t the sort of attitude I’d expect from a guy who’d just been reunited with an old friend he hadn’t seen in ages. He seemed almost scared, somehow. Like he’d run into a person he would’ve rather avoided, or seen something he never wanted to witness. Like he’d been confronted head-on by a dark spot in his history.

“Oh,” said Tamaki, “I’d better be trotting off soon. My grammy and gramps’re waiting for me! I’m supposed to be hauling back dinner makings, see?” she explained, holding up a cloth shopping bag she was carrying. “Though they’ll be the ones cooking it, of course! They’ve been stuffing me up tight since I popped in, I’m telling you. It’s been rough—what’re they trying to do, pudge me up?”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that,” said Andou. “You’ve always been crazy slim, after all. And even if you did gain a bit of weight, it, uhh…wouldn’t catch a drip.”

“Wouldn’t catch a drip, huh? Well, that’s a relief. And hee hee, look at you, Jurai! You actually remember the words I taught you!”

“Just a few of them, though. ‘Wouldn’t catch a drip’ means, like, ‘wouldn’t matter’ or ‘wouldn’t make a difference,’ right?”

“Yup! That’s right, all right!” Tamaki confirmed with a satisfied grin. “But really, time for me to move. Later, Jurai! Give Hatoko a shout for me. And see you around too, Tomoyo!”

With a final wave, Tamaki went on her way. The moment she turned her back, I heard Andou let out a quiet sigh. As best as I could tell, it was a sigh of relief—like he’d finally let out all the tension that had been building up in him throughout the whole exchange.

Then, suddenly, that distinct intonation of hers rang out once more. “Don’t get all tied up with me, Jurai. You’ll hurt my feelings,” said Tamaki, turning to face us once more. “I’m not all that chafed anymore. Not with you or with Shizumu.”

Beside me, Andou gasped. Tamaki was wearing the same cheerful smile as ever, but Andou’s expression had frozen solid. He’d broken out into such a cold sweat, I could see it dripping down his face.

“But you know,” Tamaki continued, “once you wreck things up, they never go back to how they used to be. That’s just how it goes. Be around.”

With that final, unfamiliar parting phrase, Tamaki departed for good.

“Hey, Andou…? Are you okay?” I asked nervously. He was just sitting there, head hung and shoulders slumped, a look of sorrow tinting his expression.

“Hmm…?” he mumbled after a moment. “Oh, yeah, I’m fine… She’s got one heck of an accent, right? I guess that’s the Fukushima dialect.”

“Oh, Fukushima? Huh. I never knew that’s how people talk over there.”

“Not exactly the most appealing dialect for a girl to speak, is it?”

“That’s…a question of taste, probably.” Though personally, yeah. Definitely doesn’t appeal to me, at least. Heck, with how fast she talked and how little inflection she put into it, I could barely even understand half of what she was saying.

“Her grandparents are from Fukushima, I guess. Tamaki was raised speaking standard Japanese, apparently, but whenever she goes over to her grandparents’ place, their dialect influences hers before you know it.” At that point, Andou stopped talking. His gaze fell back down to the ground. “Tamaki’s always been really easily influenced on the whole, actually,” he muttered in an incredibly subdued tone.

“Hey, Andou? Who *is* she, really? What sort of relationship do you have with her?” I asked. I couldn’t help myself. I was beyond curious about this mystery girl who called Andou by his first name like it was nothing.

Andou hesitated again. It didn’t really seem like he wanted to talk about it, but eventually, he began to slowly explain. “Tamaki is Sagami’s ex-girlfriend.”

“Sagami? Like, the one at our school?”

“Yeah, him. They went to the same middle school, and they were already dating by the time I got to know them. Some circumstances brought us all together, and the four of us—ah, Hatoko was around too—ended up hanging out a lot…we were friends, basically. When we were in the eighth grade, that is.”

Part of that wasn’t news to me, at least. Hatoko had vaguely mentioned that Sagami and Andou met in the eighth grade before. During the one period of his life that Andou would look back on and cringe at.

“But…you said she was his *ex*?” I asked.

“They broke up. Sagami dumped her,” Andou explained bluntly. I was curious about why he’d do something like that, but I wasn’t nosy enough to come out and ask…only for Andou to let an absolutely outrageous answer slip out, totally unprompted. “Bunch of stuff about her being a guy and all.”

“Huh? Wait…huh? Huuuh?! A-A guy?!”

“Oh!” Andou clapped a hand across his mouth. “Sorry, my bad. Forget I said that, okay? She’s not *really* a guy or anything.”

Nooope, not happening! You think I could just forget that? No way, no how! Wh-What the heck is that supposed to mean? Tamaki, a guy? But she was so cute! I didn’t think that style was in fashion for guys too!

“*Anyway*, the point is, a bunch of stuff happened, and Sagami and Tamaki broke up. We sort of drifted apart after that, and we haven’t talked in ages,” said Andou, wrapping up his explanation without providing any further details.

It was way too brief of a summary for me to get a clear picture of things. I would’ve really liked to at least clarify whether Tamaki was a girl, or a femboy, or what, but I was reluctant to pry any deeper than I already had.

Somehow, I got the impression that their circumstances were complicated and more than a little heavy. Andou would never have looked at Tamaki the way he did otherwise. He looked like a terrified herbivore staring down one of its natural predators.

"All right, let's head out," said Andou, reverting back to his usual tone and standing up. I followed his example.

Andou, a man who seemed dedicated to denying his future self even a single day he could look back on without cringing, had something in his past that even *he* admitted he'd be better off not thinking about. What on earth had happened? And, just maybe…could it be that the time frame he, Sagami, and Tamaki were friends overlapped with the time the two of us first met?

That's right. When we were in the eighth grade, Andou and I met once. He didn't seem to remember it, but I did, clear as day. And back then, he came across as an almost completely different person…

☆

I said my goodbyes to Tomoyo and arrived home right around five in the afternoon. The front door was locked, so apparently, I was the first one back. Fortunately, we kept a spare key hidden in our mailbox, so I was able to make it inside without a hitch.

Jeez, what a way to end the day. Tomoyo and I were having such a good time, and I just had to go and run into the last person I wanted to see, right at the finish line.

A moment later, though, I shook my head. It wasn't that I didn't want to see her—that made me sound like *I* was the victim. The truth was that I was *ashamed* to see her. I thought we'd never meet again, and I definitely didn't expect to run into her on the street out of nowhere. The Goddess of Fate, it seemed, was a nihilist with a sick sense of humor.

I paused for a moment, then shook my head again. Come on, snap out of it! Don't go letting this depress you. Just take your mind off your reunion with Tamaki. If you really boil it down, all that happened was you met an old acquaintance and it was kind of awkward!

And now that that's out of the way, it's time to get hyped! Oh? You want to know what the point of getting hyped is when nobody else is even around? Mwa ha ha—oh, you simpleminded fool! You're gonna get hyped precisely because nobody else is around! There isn't a boy in the nation who doesn't understand what I'm getting at, here! Being home alone is living the no-roommates dream! Of course you'd get hyped for it!

"Oh, crap—get down!" I shouted, kicking my shoes off at light speed and diving headfirst into my house. I hit the floor rolling, somersaulting all the way to the bottom of the stairs before springing to my feet, pressing my back to the wall and concealing myself in a blind spot!

"Phew! That was too close… I almost, err…almost…anyway, *way* too close!"

Nice! I'm on the ball today—execution: flawless! If terrorists ever take over my house, I'll be able to deal with them in no time at all! My anti-home-invader techniques would put the Home Alone kid to shame!

"Wooooooaaahhhggg," I screamed unintelligibly, for lack of anything better to do with myself. "Gggmmmnnnaaabbbbbboobs!"

I rounded off the scream by shouting "boobs." Again, for no particular reason. I was just enjoying the excitement of shouting something you're *usually* not supposed to say at all at the top of your lungs.

With that out of the way, I started humming a happy little song and stripped down to my underwear! Normally, my sister would literally kick my ass if I wandered around the house in my boxers, but on that day, it was all moumantai! I twirled my clothes up into a ball, turned to face our laundry room, and landed a crosscourt three-point shot into the washing machine. *The gods help those who help themselves, and that's how I knew that shot wouldn't miss!*

My humming gradually transitioned into meaningless, half-muttered lyrics as I climbed the stairs, snapping my fingers to the beat. I was feeling pretty groovy, and it seemed like the perfect moment to break out in a song of my own creation!

"Wings of aaash, rending the starless skyyy! Bloodred stains, your remains, vanish niiigh!"

Oh yeah. I'm a straight-up songwriter. I stayed up all night the day I bought *Infinity Maria* to compose—ah, wait, I mean, the song was born of pure inspiration, and popped into my head fully formed! In any case, I sure wrote the whole song without so much as laying a finger on the actual guitar at any point in the process.

"Deep, deep, in the ocean deeepths, your crooked smile, the tears you weeept, were you angel-blessed, or devil-seeent?! *Hey!*"

And, into the rap verse!

"Yo yo, kick it up, it's showtime! Get your ticket and get in line! Wipe those tears up, baby, don't cry—you know your love's already mine! Cryin' out to the skies, oh my god! Days spent tellin' lies, fakin' hard! Wanna touch your heart, that all right? C'mon baby, then hold me tight!"

And with those ultra-hot and not at all forced rhymes laid down, time to drop into MC mode!

"You listening, people?! Perk your ears and get a load of my hot tunes! C'mon, outta your shells and onto the floor! It took a miracle to bring us together today, so get out there and show your thanks! Let! Me! Hear! You! *Yell*, people! We're taking common sense and normal reality and kicking 'em to the curb!"

And now that our super hot lead vocalist's riled them up, it's finally time for the hook!

"Wind's melody blowing through the niiight—*through the niiight* (Background vocalist chiming in to harmonize)! Pain and longing cast up on hiiigh—*to the skyyy* (This time, an interjection)! Moon cuts through the

cloudy sky, can you see it shining high, through the teardrops in your eyes?! Raging flames of tragic dawn, sweep the skies till night's dark's gone, day's haze shimmers in the air, I look around but you're! Not! Theeere!"

Okay, time to close it out! One last line, fragile and fleeting, but filled with all the hunger and desire of man!

"Oh… Death of me, destiny… *Oooooh* (In a falsetto)!"

My body had only just reached the top of the staircase, but my soul was on cloud nine. *Wooo, yes! Ecstasy, baby!* My own original tune, *Death of Me, Destiny* (or D2, as my fans would surely call it) was the song I'd play to close out each and every one of my shows…if I, y'know, had any of those.

But seriously, though, I think I might actually have a sorta crazy talent for songwriting! Maybe I should try having a Vocaloid sing it and make it into a real song or something! Then it'll get a novelization, and an anime adaptation, and I'll make a friggin' killing in royalties!

"All right, that's enough singing for now! What's next…? Oh, right! I have that late-night movie I set to record 'cause its title sounded super dirty! I'll watch that!"

Man, having your home to yourself is the best! It's a small world, but it's my small world, and that makes it feel like a limitless paradise! I opened up the door to my room in the highest of spirits!

Chifuyu was waiting inside.

Specifically, she was sitting on my bed with her arms wrapped around her knees, as expressionless as ever. Her glassy eyes were fixed upon me. An extremely important question immediately struck me, and surprisingly, it wasn't "Why is Chifuyu in my room?" but rather "Aren't the walls in this house, like, super thin?" My sister, after all, started banging on them whenever I made even the slightest bit of noise.

I stood there for a moment, frozen solid, until Chifuyu finally spoke up in a mystified tone of voice.

"You record late-night movies because their titles sound dirty?"

Welp. Time to seriously consider the merits of suicide.

Chapter 7: Sweet and Sour Make-Believe

“Andou?”

“What is it, O great and mighty Lady Chifuyu?”

“I want snacks. And I’m thirsty.”

“As you wish! I shall return posthaste!”

I sprinted through the house at the speed of a raging gale, gathering some snacks and a glass of juice and rushing it all back up to my room. Then I set them down on the ground, got down on my hands and knees, and bowed to her like I was offering the refreshments to the spirits of my departed ancestors.

“Your orange juice and potato chips, your highness!”

“Thanks…mnh. You didn’t put ice in the juice.”

“M-My sincerest apologies! I’ll go back and fetch another with ice on the —”

“Don’t bother. It’s too late.” Chifuyu hopped off the bed and turned her cold gaze down upon me. “I’ll punish you,” she declared in a voice as frigid as the ice I’d neglected; a voice that pierced my heart to its core.

I trembled, shivering with fear as I turned around on the spot to face away from her—or, more precisely, to face my backside toward her.

“Take this.”

Thwack! Chifuyu smacked me on the ass. Yup. I sure just got spanked by a ten-year-old child.

“P-Please, spare me, milady Chifuyu!”

Chifuyu cocked her head. “Did it really hurt that much?”

“The smack, no. My heart, yes.” The humiliation was almost too much to bear. The fact that I still registered it as humiliating was probably a good sign, I guess. The moment I started thinking of it as something pleasant would be the moment I abandoned my humanity entirely. The selfish little tyrant-princess behind me, however, was ignorant of my internal turmoil and continued to wield the lash of authority with wild abandon.

“Andou, be a chair for me next.”

“A ch-chair?!”

“Now.”

I hesitated, but I couldn’t disobey. “Okay,” I conceded, getting down on my hands and knees. Chifuyu immediately hopped up onto me, using my back as a stool. I could feel the soft warmth of her rear directly on my back. “Ch-Chifuyu? My pride’s kinda barely hanging on by a thread, here, and this pose really isn’t—”

“Chairs don’t talk.” *Thwack*! Chifuyu gave me another spank, and the last remnants of said pride shattered to pieces. “You said you’d do anything I asked for, Andou, so you don’t get to complain.”

It was true. In fact, I'd also gone into full-prostration mode and begged her not to tell any of the others about what she'd witnessed. Doing somebody's bidding like this was an absolute betrayal of my honor as a proud, solitary warrior…but it was simply unavoidable. My only path forward in life was to swear unwavering fealty to Chifuyu. I'm gonna be honest: I value keeping up appearances more than I value pride *any* day of the week.

"Andou."

I kept my mouth firmly shut.

"No ignoring me." *Thwack*!

What?! But you just told me not to talk! What a tyrant! I'm the chair of a child despot!

"Walk around, Andou."

"Huh? Y-You mean, like, you want a piggyback ride?"

"No. Walk around like a chair."

Like a chair…? So, just like this? She wants me to crawl around on all fours?! "Ugh… So you're literally driving me like a workhorse?"

"No. Not a horse. Like a pig."

"A pig?!"

"I like pigs better than horses."

Well, good for friggin' you! Maybe she means she likes eating pork better than horse meat?

"Hey, Chifuyu? Don't you think you might be going just a *little* too far with this?" I asked, putting in an honest effort to throw off my chains and unseat the oppressor from my back. "I, the man some call the *King of the Cosmic Apocalyptia*, am not so generous as to serve as your minion…"

"Late-night movies with dirty sounding titles."

"…and that's why you should give this pathetic pig whatever orders you fancy, milady!"

It's no use. I'm completely outmatched. She holds all *the trump cards!* Recording movies with dirty-sounding titles was just so, I dunno, preteen? Or maybe wimpy…? It's the sort of move that comes across as just plain desperate in the most humiliating way possible! Getting caught watching straight-up porn would've been manlier, at least!

"What was it? *Love in the Afternoon*?" asked Chifuyu, who had taken the liberty of fiddling with my recorder and learning the title in question. And worse, that wasn't even her only trump card! "You were singing really loud too."

Why did I have to go and belt out my own composition like that…? Actually, wait. Now that I think about it, getting super into singing a song isn't nearly as embarrassing as the whole late-night movie thing, is it? Like, singing's a perfectly valid form of expression, and real songwriters probably do that sort of thing all the time!

Music is dragged from the aether through an agonizing process of repeated trial and error! Surely everyone starts out feeling ashamed of

singing their own music, right? But they overcome that shame and go on to create works of art capable of moving all who listen to them! Ergo, writing my own song is not humiliating, and nobody can criticize me for singing it at the top of my lungs!

"It was kind of bad too."

Okay, so maybe they can criticize the song itself, but that's just life!

"You put too many big, dumb words in, and it didn't make any sense. The part where you started just talking for a while was really weird too."

"Okay...I'm sorry, so please, just stop. No more painfully specific criticism."

"Then run, piggy. Giddyap!" she shouted, spurring me forward. With a smack. To the ass.

"O-Oink, oink!" I snorted, doing my best pig impression as I scrambled in circles around the room. I couldn't see onto my back, so I didn't know for sure what sort of face she was making, but I could tell from the excited way she was shifting around on me that she was enjoying herself. I went around and around the room, again and again, keeping up the pig act all the while.

"Andou, your pig impression's perfect."

"O-Oh? Ha ha...wow, funny how some compliments don't make you feel good at all..."

"Next, do a sweet and sour pork impression."

"Do a what?!" We've officially entered the realm of the impossible!

"Now."

"S-Sweet oink! Sour oink!"

"Huh...? What was *that*?"

"Stop cringing! Spare meee!" How did you expect me to do a friggin' sweet and sour pork impression?! I can't take this...

I could hardly even see through the tears pooling in my eyes anymore. The shattered remains of my pride strewn about the floor were about to be swept away by a flood of liquid sorrow. My heart...was broken.

"Don't cry, Andou," said Chifuyu, giving my head a gentle pat from atop my back. "This was fun, so I won't tell anyone about today."

"R-Really?"

"I promise."

"Th-Thank you so much, your eternal graciousness!" I exclaimed, executing another perfect genuflection. I'm certain now—she must be the virgin Mary herself, reborn into this world! Could there possibly be a human being out there with a heart as generous and pure as hers?

Yeah. There totally are. Tons of 'em. Seriously, most people would've pulled out of the bit *long* before they got to the making-me-act-like-sweet-and-sour-pork part! In any case, though, I'd finally regained my human dignity and rejoined the bipedal world. I sat down on my bed, bringing me eye to eye with Chifuyu.

"So, it sorta feels like I should've asked this a looong time ago, but what're you doing here, Chifuyu?"

I didn't have to ask her *how* she got into my room, of course. Locks and doors were meaningless in the face of the Empress of Genesis. No, I was curious about the *why* of the matter.

Chifuyu glanced away awkwardly, then quietly mumbled her reply. "I got in a fight with Cookie."

Chifuyu's story, in short: earlier that day Cookie, aka Kuki Madoka, had come over to her house to play. They'd whiled away the afternoon, playing together like they always did, until Chifuyu's mother stepped out to go shopping. That's when the argument happened, and in the heat of the moment, Chifuyu ran out from her house, used *World Create*, and made a teleport-enabled escape to my room.

"Huh...? Wait, does that mean that Kuki's alone in your house right now?"

"Yeah."

Jeez, blasé much? Do you have any idea how awkward Kuki must be feeling right about now? Going over to play at another kid's house only to have that kid pull a runner... "Awkward" probably doesn't even begin to describe it! It's not like she can just go home and leave the house unlocked and unsupervised!

"What on earth were you two fighting about?" I asked, but Chifuyu didn't say a word. "Did she make you spell pig backwards and say 'funny colors'?"

Chifuyu glared at me in that distinctive "I'm an elementary schooler, not an idiot" sort of way. *C'mon, it was just a joke!* She poutily puffed up her cheeks, still not saying a word, but I kept doggedly staring her down until she finally caved and started to explain herself.

"Cookie said I shouldn't play with you all anymore."

"What do you mean, play with us?"

"She said I should stop going to the high school after class."

"And that turned into a fight?"

Chifuyu nodded. "She said high schoolers are scary, so I should stop playing with you."

Hmm. The specifics were still a mystery, but the larger pieces of the puzzle were starting to come together, at least. The long and short of it seemed to be that Kuki had been a little too outspoken for her own good about her opinions regarding Chifuyu's daily excursions to the literary club. It made sense, especially when I took into account the pointed glare she'd shot me right after I met her the other day.

It's not that I couldn't understand where she was coming from, honestly. When I was an elementary schooler, high schoolers looked like they were practically adults to me. They really were a little scary—it was like they lived in a totally different world. If I'd learned that a classmate of mine was spending all their time hanging out with high schoolers, I might've been naturally inclined to try to stop them too.

It's not normal for an elementary schooler to have a bunch of high schoolers as her social circle.

The warning Miss Satomi had given me some time before rang out in my ears. When I really stopped to think about it, I realized that she might have been right. Maybe it really *wasn't* normal for Chifuyu to come visit us over and over, day after day. That was the reasonable way of looking at it, and the fact that our circumstances made *us* less than normal ourselves didn't do much to change it.

"Anyway, Chifuyu, I think you should go back home for now. I'm starting to feel really bad for poor Kuki," I said.

Chifuyu glanced away, hesitated, then mumbled, "It's awkward." I guess she wasn't ready to come face-to-face with the girl she'd just fought with.

"Hmm. Okay, then how about if I come along?" I suggested. If being alone with Kuki was too much for her, I figured that having a third party there to mediate might be just the thing.

On *second* thought, though, having a member of the literary club as a mediator—that is, the club that the whole argument was centered around—seemed more than a little likely to just make things even *more* complicated. *Maybe this is a bad idea after all,* I thought, just a second too late.

"Okay. Thanks, Andou."

"Bwuh?" I grunted as a Gate opened up directly beneath my feet. One *World Create*-enabled portal to oblivion, coming right up! "G-Gaaah! I'm fall—ah, no, I mean, I'm plummetiiiiiiiing!"

At the other end of my surprise summoning, I found myself deposited upon a huge couch.

"Hoooly crap, that nearly gave me a heart attack," I muttered. "Thought I was gonna fall all the way to Brazil!"

I sat up and inspected my surroundings. As best as I could tell, I was in a living room, and it seemed natural to assume it was specifically the living room of Chifuyu's house.

"Sure is big, huh…?" I muttered again. This technically wasn't the first time I'd been to her house. We'd stopped by here back when Hatoko disappeared for an evening as well. I hadn't actually gone inside at the time, to be fair, but I distinctly remember thinking that the building looked huge from the outside.

The couch I landed on looked like it must've cost a fortune, and the lighting up above me looked like it was probably the height of interior design. The entire place just felt super bougie overall. I knew that Chifuyu was an only child, but was she really living in a house this huge with just her mother and father for company?

"Hmm… I guess I should go find Kuki and try to talk her down and smooth things over a little before Chifuyu arrives?" That was my best guess as to what Chifuyu was planning on, anyway. She was so taciturn, it always fell to us to read into the very few words she managed to speak as best as we could.

I left the living room, found a staircase, and climbed up to the second floor. I figured Kuki would probably be in Chifuyu's room, and just as I was hoping, I found a door with a nameplate on it that read "Chifuyu's Roomph!" The "Roomph" part, by the way, was in a word bubble being shouted by a stylized Ultraman caricature lifting up a giant monster. *Weirdly elaborate, that design.*

I knocked on the door, and a reply immediately came from within. "Ch-Chii! I'm s-so sorry, I didn't mean—" Kuki shouted as she opened the door, nearly in tears. The moment she saw me, though, her face went white as a sheet. Her eyes opened up wide, and her mouth flapped in a wordless stammer. So, yeah, she was pretty surprised! "Wh-Wh-What're you doing...?"

"Hey! Nice to meet...well, I guess we've met before, huh? So, uhh, nice to see you again, Kuki!"

"A-Andou, right?"

"Yup! So, mind if I come inside for a minute?"

"E-Eeek!" Kuki's legs gave out, and she fell backward onto the floor. She scrambled away from me as fast as she could manage, almost like she was running away from some sort of horrible monster.

Well, that kinda stings. I know that older guys are scary and all, but, like, seriously? That scary?

"G-Go away! Get away from me!"

"It's okay, Kuki! You don't have to be scared. I don't bite, I promise," I said, speaking as calmly and gently as possible as I stepped into the room. Said room, incidentally, was *incredibly* cutesy in its design. The curtains and bedsheets were decorated with adorable little cartoon critters, and there were stuffed animals all over the place

Kuki's frantic retreat was eventually cut off when she bumped into the wall back-first. With nowhere left to run, all she could do was sit there and tremble, gazing up at me with terror in her eyes. *Okay, for real, isn't she a little bit* too *freaked out?*

"Kuki, it's okay, really! I'm not scary, I promise! I just want to talk with you, that's all," I said, trying to soothe her as I slowly crossed the room.

With each step I took, Kuki jumped with fright. "G-G-Get back! Stay away from me! I'll c-call the police!" she shrieked, utterly distraught. I could see tears pooling in her eyes.

"Okay...what's wrong, seriously? What're you so scared of?" I asked. This was a real head-scratcher. I had no idea what I'd done so horribly wrong to make her *this* terrified of me. Had I inadvertently triggered some horrible trauma she kept locked away deep within herself? "Kuki, it's okay. Just relax, everything's fine. I won't do anything you don't want me to, and I *definitely* won't hurt you. Just believe in me, okay?"

I tried acting in as thoroughly courteous and gentlemanly of a manner as I could. Kuki, however, shot me a gaze full of fear and hatred as she screamed at the top of her lungs.

“How am I supposed to *trust* a guy who walks around in his underweeear?!”

…Hmm?

I slowly, very slowly, turned to look into the full-length mirror propped up conveniently nearby.

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Reflected in the mirror was not the chivalrous gentleman reaching his hand out to a scared and wounded little girl I'd been expecting. No, all I saw was a horrible degenerate wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts, looming over the elementary schooler he was undoubtedly about to assault.

Oh. Right. I never got dressed again after landing that three-pointer into the washing machine, did I? I sure was in my underwear back when Chifuyu slapped my ass. Suddenly, it was exceptionally clear to me why Kuki looked like she was staring down a man-eating monster. No need for any deep-seated prior trauma to rationalize this situation. Heck, *anyone* would be terrified if a mostly naked dude was slowly and deliberately walking toward them!

"G-Go away! And never come back! Get *out* of Chii's room, and *never talk to her again*!" Kuki shrieked, her sentences punctuated by sobs.

And boy, did I ever get the heck out of that room in a hurry! I fled right on out into the hallway, where I found Chifuyu, apparently waiting for the right moment to make her entrance. She looked up at me, eyes full of hope.

"How did it go, Andou?"

"Sorry… I think the situation just got even more complicated."

And so, I accidentally made Kuki's fear of high schoolers much, *much* worse than it already was.

Supernatural Battles

I'm not all that chafed anymore. Not with you or with Shizumu.

Tamaki
…
…

…

Excerpt from the Bloody Vivre

CHARACTER FILE 09

Chapter 8: Cookie Comes Calling

"...and that's pretty much the whole story. Talk about a disaster, right?"

The next day after school, I explained everything that had happened to the other members of the literary club. Chifuyu had yet to make an appearance, so we took the opportunity to have a high-schoolers-only meeting in our club room. A strategy council, as it were.

"There's just one thing I'd like to say to you above all else, Andou," Sayumi sighed after I finished my explanation. "*Love in the Afternoon* is not an erotic film."

"Crap! Why'd I go and tell you about that part?!" I had the good sense to omit the bit where I put on a sweet and sour pork act, but apparently, there were a couple other parts I should've kept my mouth shut about!

"It's a well-known movie starring Audrey Hepburn, an extremely famous actress, and it was filmed over fifty years ago—in black and white, at that. I seriously doubt it has any scenes of the sort you were hoping for," elucidated Sayumi with a cold, expressionless stare. Tomoyo and Hatoko were giving me the same sort of look, and they were starting to make me extremely uncomfortable.

C-Come on, give me a break! High school guys can't help but get interested in that sorta stuff! Secretly recording spicy late-night TV shows behind our parents' backs is a perfectly natural compulsion! Blame puberty, not me!

"And that's not even starting on the part about how you prance around singing your own original songs when you're at home alone," added Tomoyo with a scornful glance.

"L-Lay off, okay?! Everyone does that every once in a while, right?! When you're home alone, the whole house is your own personal stage! Of *course* you have to belt out a song or two!"

"Hmm... I mean, I have to admit—" began Tomoyo.

"Huh? No, I've never done that," said Hatoko, cutting her off. "I guess I hum my favorite songs sometimes, though!"

"Agreed," added Sayumi. "Normal people most definitely do nothing of the sort."

"R-Right! You're the only moron who'd *ever* do something that stupid!" shouted Tomoyo, stabbing me in the back and twisting the knife.

Oh, you little jerk! I know you were about to agree with me before the others started talking!

"In any case, it would seem this issue has taken an extremely troublesome turn. I must admit, I never considered the possibility that spending time with us would drive a wedge between Chifuyu and her friends," said Sayumi before turning to shoot me a glare. "And thanks to Andou's *incredibly* well-considered and not at all brain-dead decisions, it's going to be significantly harder to resolve the problem than it had to be."

All I could do was hang my head in shame. She was right, and I knew it. I'd done my best to explain myself to Kuki, but the fact that I couldn't reveal the truth about our powers made it more or less impossible to come up with a convincing excuse.

"From Kuki's perspective, I'm just some dude who went over to an elementary school-aged girl's house, stripped down to his undies for *some* reason, and barged into her room," I summarized.

"In other words, a dangerous freak," said Tomoyo with a roll of her eyes.

Yup. Gotta admit, there's no way to argue my way out of that conclusion this time.

"What sort of person is this Kuki, Andou?" asked Sayumi.

"If I had to describe her in a word...I'd say she's a very *demonetized* sort of kid."

Sayumi sighed. "For the record, Andou, 'demonetize' isn't a fancy synonym for 'demonic.' It means 'causing something to stop making or functioning as money.'"

"Wait, seriously?! It's not, like, robotize but for demons?!" *Well, that sure was a humiliating misunderstanding! Good on Sayumi for immediately picking up on the connection between demons and Kuki's name, though.* "I mean, uhh... Basically, Kuki's just your totally average cute little elementary school kid. Kinda on the overly diligent side and maybe just a little high-strung, though."

"I see," said Sayumi with a pensive nod. "I suspect, then, that Kuki might feel that we've been trying to steal Chifuyu away from her."

"To *steal* Chifuyu?" I repeated incredulously.

"Kuki mentioned that Chifuyu talks about us all the time, didn't she? I don't think it's uncommon for people to have mixed feelings when their friends tell them about how much fun it is to spend time with their *other* friends."

"Ah, yeah, I get it now," said Tomoyo in a somewhat self-deprecating tone as I nodded in understanding. "When you put it that way, I was sort of like that when I was that age too. You know, all weirdly possessive—like, I just *had* to be somebody's *best* friend."

I had to admit, I understood where she was coming from. I'd gone through a pretty similar phase when I was a kid too. Seeing somebody who I thought was my *best* friend getting along with some other kid just as well—or worse, *better*—than they got along with me made me feel empty, and frustrated, and just weirdly irritable overall. I don't know if I should call it jealousy, or possessiveness, or maybe just a manifestation of the youthful desire to be in total control of everything, but the point is that I could empathize with her.

"It's tough seeing a kid you like being better friends with someone else than they are with you, isn't it?" Hatoko quietly muttered. She looked a little downcast.

“This raises a lot of questions, though, doesn’t it?” said Tomoyo. “Like, we don’t really know how Chifuyu’s school life looks at all. It’s sort of a mystery.”

“From what I’ve heard, Kuki pretty much takes care of her all the time. I guess the other kids even call her Chifuyu’s…mom…” *Oh, right. I should probably tell them about all that stuff too, shouldn’t I?* “Actually, while we’re on the subject of Chifuyu’s school life…”

I gave everyone a quick summary of what had happened the other morning, up to and including the part where Chifuyu decided to drop out of school.

“Are you serious, Andou?” asked Tomoyo, furrowing her brow.

“Yeah,” I confirmed with a nod. “I thought she was just acting on a whim, and I didn’t really make much out of it… Looking back on it, though, I can’t help but feel like it might’ve been some sorta sign.”

“Now that you mention it, Chifuyu didn’t go to school on the day we did all that cosplay stuff, right?” added Hatoko with a worried frown. “She said she was sick, but it didn’t seem like that was true…”

The four of us fell into a gloomy silence.

“This is purely hypothetical, of course, but…it’s possible that our powers have something to do with all of this,” Sayumi finally said. “Considering how young Chifuyu is, awakening to an inexplicable power for seemingly no reason may have had an effect on her that we couldn’t appreciate, especially given that she has to keep her power entirely hidden in her day-to-day life and doesn’t have anyone at school to share her secret with. It’s possible that the stress of the situation is spilling out to impact her social life.”

Obtaining our powers was a shock too big to handle even for us high schoolers. Wouldn’t it follow, then, that it was an even bigger shock for a girl as young as Chifuyu? She always acted so dispassionate about everything, so it was hard to say for sure, but for all we knew, behind that perpetually sleepy expression of hers lurked depths of fear and anxiety beyond our wildest imaginations.

“Of course, that’s nothing more than a guess,” said Sayumi, clapping her hands and guiding us all off that demoralizing train of thought. “Now then! I don’t think we should be depressing ourselves with baseless speculation. Let’s turn our minds in a productive direction and come up with a plan to deal with the Kuki affair.”

In the end, the plan we chose to execute was just about as direct as strategies could get: we’d try to get Kuki to develop an understanding with the literary club! We reasoned that as long as we could convince her that high schoolers are nothing to be afraid of, we’d be able to do away with her distorted view of our organization.

That said, between her swimming classes and piano lessons, Kuki was a pretty darn busy kid. It took two days for her schedule to be clear, but she finally found the time to pay our club room a visit with Chifuyu after school.

"I brought Cookie."

"Th-Thanks for having me…"

Chifuyu strolled in and plopped down in her usual chair without missing a beat. She was so relaxed you'd almost think this was her own personal room. In striking contrast to her nonchalance, meanwhile, Kuki was glancing about the room so restlessly, it almost looked like she was shivering.

Looks like it's time for Andou the gentleman to step up to the plate and put her at ease! "Hey, Kuki," I said with a friendly wave. "Long time no—"

"Don't talk to me," Kuki snapped, shutting me down with an ice-cold glare. "I *will* pull this if you try anything," she added, laying a hand on the personal alarm strapped to her backpack.

Okay, jeez. You don't have to treat me like that *dangerous of a criminal, do you?* We'd only just started, and I was already on the brink of keeling over with a broken heart.

Thankfully, Sayumi was there to step up to the plate and greet her in my stead. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Takanashi Sayumi, and I currently serve as president of the literary club. Thank you for coming all this way to meet with us today."

"N-Nice to meet you!" squeaked Kuki. "My name's Kuki Madoka."

"No need to be so nervous! Please, have a seat," said Sayumi with a perfectly genial smile, pulling out a chair for our guest.

Hatoko was quick to follow her lead, presenting Kuki with a cup of tea. "Here you go! We have fruit juice too if you don't like tea. Just let me know!"

"Th-Thank you! Tea is fine."

The plan was off to a solid start. Our next objective: have Sayumi explain what the literary club was *really* all about to her!

"Our literary club," she began, "was established forty years ago. You might say that we're a longstanding institution within this school. Our typical activities include writing short stories, drafting scripts for plays or audio dramas, reading and discussing literary masterpieces, putting out a club magazine for the student body to appreciate, and more. As president, I've chosen to allow our members a great deal of autonomy in their actions —we have no quotas and are free to learn and produce at a rate that suits each of us as individuals."

The amazing part was that nothing she'd said was *technically* a lie. Sayumi simply described our club in the most stunningly convenient terms possible, leaving out every detail that would come across as even remotely incriminating. I guess if you really had to pick holes in her story, the bit about reading the classics and writing plays was something *previous*

generations of our club did that we'd never really touched. All things considered, we were pretty laid-back.

"W-Wow, that's kind of incredible," Kuki said in wide-eyed astonishment. "Isn't it, Chii?" she asked, turning to look at Chifuyu, who was sitting next to her.

Chifuyu cocked her head. "When did we do any of that stuff?"

Chifuyuuu! You can't just come out and say things like that! Again! Oh, wait—gah! Crap! We totally forgot to tell Chifuyu the plan!

"Huh...? Wh-What do you mean? Was she...lying to me?" said Kuki, a twinge of suspicion now coloring her gaze.

Chifuyu, on the other hand, finally caught on to her mistake and frantically tried to right the course. "Ah... N-No, she wasn't. It's true. We really do all that. We do tons of serious stuff," she explained, but Kuki looked as doubtful as ever. "I learned all about Dazai Osamu the other day."

Ooh, nice follow-up, Chifuyu! That's technically not even a lie!

"Really?" asked Kuki, arching an eyebrow.

"Really," said Chifuyu. "I know everything about him."

"Okay, then name one of Dazai's stories. And not *Run, Melos!* We learned about that in class, so it doesn't count."

Chifuyu clearly didn't see this little interrogation coming and froze in place. She crossed her arms, spent a few seconds in thought, then mumbled an answer in the least confident tone I'd ever heard from her.

"C-Category Error...?"

Oof, so close! That's one of the ones I came up with! I guess she must've mixed up the pastiches with the real thing?

"That's not one of Dazai's stories at all!" shouted Kuki.

"But Andou said it was," protested Chifuyu.

Agh, no! You're adding fuel to the fire, Chifuyu!

Naturally, Kuki turned her accusatory glare upon me next. "Have you been teaching Chifuyu lies, Andou?"

"It wasn't a *lie*, exactly... It's, uh, well... Basically, I decided that as a gesture of respect for Dazai Osamu's passing, I'd come up with a super cool title, which is where *Category Error: No Longer Human* came—"

"A title? What do you mean, a title?"

Whoops! You sure you wanna go there, little miss? Because I'll absolutely answer that question! I'll talk your ear off! I'll keep you here all night—hell, I'll keep you up all night listening to all twenty-four verses of my sermon on the awesomeness of personal titles, starting from verse one: The Storied History of Personal Titles in the Warring States Era!

"*Well*, you may have heard of how Oda Nobunaga was referred to as the Demon King of the Sixth Heaven, or how Date Masamune was called the One-Eyed Dragon. This is undeniable proof that title culture has existed in Japan since at *least* the Warring States era! Titles and epithets served as symbols of pride, as a very way of life for the valiant men who all but lived on the battlefield, and—"

“They’re like this,” said Chifuyu, cutting me off to produce a sheet of paper from who knows where. A sheet of paper with *Sweet and Sour Pineapple* written on it. “*This* is a title.”

Kuki blinked, and I nearly choked. “*No*! A *real* title’s more like…” I grabbed the sheet of paper and scrawled “*The King of the Cosmic Apocalyptia*” on it. “…this! *This* is a title!”

“Huh?”

“Cut it out, you two! Can’t you see she has no clue what to make of all this?!” shouted Tomoyo. She was right too. The look on Kuki’s face told me that to her, everything we’d been saying was just so much incomprehensible gibberish.

A moment later, though, Kuki took the sheet of paper from my hands and gave it a close inspection. “So, this is a title…?”

“Mwa ha ha! Indeed, though *really*, it’s but one of the nigh countless epithets I have to my name! How long has it been since the people around me began calling me by that moniker? Five years, perhaps?”

“What do you mean, ‘apocalyptia’?” Kuki asked, gesturing at the word.

“Huh? It, err… I mean, umm… It’s like, I mean, *you* know! Like…the world when the world itself ceases to be, or, like… Man, really wish you’d just learn to sorta feel these things out… Okay, right! It’s a word for the world after everything’s fallen to ruin!”

“If everything’s fallen to ruin, then why does the world need a king?”

“That, umm… A-A real king can rule over any world, ruined or not…”

“Okay, then where does the ‘cosmic’ come into all this?”

“That’s, umm, just a filler word, basically. Like, when you’re making up a title or a power name or whatever, putting in words that just make it *sound* better’s standard practice… And, like, ‘cosmic’ sorta means space or something, so throwing it in makes the whole thing way *grander*, if I may say so my—”

“Why would you throw in a whole extra word just to make it sound bigger? Doesn’t that totally change the whole title’s meaning?”

“A-All I can say is that’s just how it goes with these things, sometimes… It’s like how they still throw in gratuitous English to sound cool in stories that’re set in English-speaking countries, so all the characters should really be speaking English *already*, and—”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

For just a moment, I faltered. “Mwa ha ha ha haaa! Well, if I must put it in the most exceedingly simple terms possible such that even the likes of you could understand, every one of your questions can be answered by one simple phrase: because it’s cooler that way!”

“Huh? You think *this* is cool?” Kuki asked in a complete deadpan.

“Uh. Yes.”

“What on earth is cool about it?”

“U-Umm… Like, the whole thing, sorta, well, on the whole? I just, y’know, personally speaking, think it’s, well, pretty cool. Yeah.”

The sheer pressure of that all too serious look on her face reduced me to a babbling mess. As I stammered out my strained excuse, Kuki gave me a little nod. She looked like she was barely holding back a fit of laughter.

"Oh, okay. I understand. Andou, you...how to put it... You really like childish things, don't you? Even though you're a high schooler."

"H-Hatoko! Hatokooo," I sobbed. "Kuki's... Kuki's bullying meee! I can't take that kiiid!"

"There, there! It must've been hard, but you did your best to stand up to her, Juu!"

"Childish... She said I'm *childish*... Couldn't she have been a little nicer about it? You can't just write me off with one word like that..."

"Yeah, I understand!"

"She's *definitely* gonna grow up to be the sort of person who's all, 'Huh? You still watch *Kamen Rider*? You know that show's for kids, right?' I just know it! Those people always act so snobby about *Kamen Rider*, then they turn around and drool over the actors who star in it when they get cast in a movie or TV drama or whatever! And they don't even *know* they're late to the party! We *real* fans always notice them *ages* before they get popular!"

"Yup, you sure do!"

I was facedown on the table and blubbering pathetically as Hatoko consoled me with the kindness and understanding of a natural-born caretaker. My heart had been crushed to pieces, and my days as a fearless warrior had come to an end. Truly tragic though it was, I would have to leave the rest of the fight to my comrades.

"Hey, Chii—does this club *really* do any actual club activities?" asked Kuki.

Chifuyu hesitated for a moment. "Probably," she finally replied. She seemed to be losing confidence as well.

"It kind of feels like you all just sort of do *whatever* to me. You said you write stories, but I bet you're just writing nonsense for fun, right?"

"Th-That's not true!" declared Chifuyu with sudden newfound energy, pointing across the table at Tomoyo. "Tomoyo writes seriously. She sends in her stories to contests."

Tomoyo, caught off guard by her sudden entry into the conversation, stiffened up. Chifuyu, you can't just say stuff like... Y'know, actually, it's probably fine to say that here. It's not like Kuki finding out about Tomoyo's writing could cause us any problems.

"To contests...? Like, the ones for the Naoki Prize, or the Akutagawa Prize?" asked Kuki, betraying an all too common biased perspective as far as literary awards went. People without any interest in novels or literature always seemed to jump straight to those two prizes whenever they thought about literary contests, presumably since they were the two largest ones in Japan.

Chifuyu shook her head and smiled confidently. “Tomoyo doesn’t bother with those. She’s on a totally different level.”

Okay... That is technically true, I guess, but the way you said it makes it sound like Tomoyo’s some sort of insanely influential writer, you know?

Just as I feared, Kuki’s eyes widened. “O-Oh, wow,” she whispered, gazing up at Tomoyo with a look of awe and respect on her face.

“N-No,” stammered Tomoyo, “I’m not really, like, not yet—”

“That’s right. Tomoyo’s amazing!” Chifuyu boasted, her eyes practically sparkling with pride as she overruled Tomoyo’s frantic protests.

I knew that look. It was the sort of look that kids get in their eyes when they say stuff like “Well, *my* daddy’s a *pilot*!”

“Tomoyo’s so good at writing, popular books look like trash to her! She always reads them and says she has no idea why they sell so well!”

Tomoyo averted her gaze.

“And she’s so good at analyzing books! She always picks out every little thing that makes the popular ones bad!”

Tomoyo buried her face in her hands.

“And she has so many ideas, she always starts writing a new story before she’s even finished with the one she’s already working on!”

It sort of looked like Tomoyo had started faintly vibrating.

“And she’s so persistent, she reuses all the ideas in her stories that get rejected over and over again!”

Tomoyo teetered on her chair. She looked seconds away from collapsing in agony.

“She’s not a pro, but she always talks about deadlines anyway! She has a pro mindset!”

Tomoyo relocated to a corner of the room, curled up into a ball, and clutched at her head.

“Plenty of people say they want to be authors without ever submitting *any* stories, so Tomoyo’s way closer to being a pro than they are! Or that’s what she said, at least!”

Tomoyo started banging her head against the floorboards.

Stop, Chifuyu! Just stop! Can’t you see she’s already dead?!

“Hatokooo... I didn’t... I didn’t mean anything *bad* by any of it... It’s just, sometimes things just aren’t going your way, and you can’t resist taking it out on someone who’s doing better than you...”

“Yeah, I understand! You’ve been working really hard, Tomoyo!”

Tomoyo had joined me as a resident of getting-consoled-by-Hatoko land.

“Really, you two. You let an elementary schooler reduce you to this state? Pathetic,” sighed Sayumi. Then she straightened her posture and turned to face the duo of little girls. I didn’t like to admit it, but our only choice was to leave it all to her.

You’ve got this, Sayumi! Avenge us!

“Let’s get back on topic, shall we? Let me think—how much have we already covered…?” said Sayumi, trying to steer the conversation back toward the literary club’s activities.

Kuki, however, leaned over and whispered into Chifuyu’s ear. “Hey, Chii? I’ve been wondering something this whole time…”

“Hmm? What?”

“Is she *really* a high schooler?”

One shot, one kill! Sayumi’s smile froze solid, and a tremor rushed through her body.

“Did you bring in one of the teachers to pretend to be the president and convince me for you? Did you *force* her to wear that uniform?”

“No. Sayumi really is the president.”

“Oh. Huh…”

“Cookie, Sayumi’s sensitive about looking like an old lady. You shouldn’t say things like that to her.”

“Ah! I-I’m sorry! I should’ve been more considerate!”

Sayumi didn’t reply. In fact, she seemed kind of broken. Or maybe petrified would be a better way of putting it? The elementary schoolers’ perfectly innocent yet perfectly brutal words slammed into her with the force of an instant-death spell.

“Hatokooo,” Sayumi sobbed. “I-I’m still… I’m still a third-year, I swear… I’m a genuine high schooler, through and through! Who *cares* if I look bad in gym bloomers?!”

“There, there! It’s okay, Sayumi! You’re really cute, I promise!”

Even Sayumi had been reduced to blubbering on Hatoko’s shoulder. *A thousand curses! Our last bastion of defense has crumbled!*

“I knew it! Chii, this isn’t a decent club at all! So stop coming here, okay? Please?” begged Kuki, tugging at Chifuyu’s sleeve. It *did* seem that we’d more or less cured her of the impression that high schoolers are scary, but in exchange, we’d given her the impression that high schoolers are all a bunch of unhinged weirdos.

As I watched her do everything she possibly could to convince Chifuyu to get the heck away from us, though, all I could think was *Man, this girl really is putting her all into this.* I could tell that she didn’t mean anything bad by it at all—she was just really, honestly worried about her friend. That was part of what made the whole issue so hard to deal with, of course.

“Okay, Chii?”

“…No,” said Chifuyu, sulking as she squeezed Squirrely with all her might. She wasn’t about to move an inch, which just made Kuki even more worked up than ever.

“But, why?! Why not, Chii?!”

“No means no!”

The two girls glared at each other. Neither was making any effort to hide their anger.

“What’s wrong with you, Chii…? Why won’t you listen to me? Do you like being with *these* people more than being with me?”

“No… I like being with you, Cookie. But…”

“But what?!”

“I have to be here. There’s a good reason… They’re the only ones who can understand…”

Oh, crap. Chifuyu, no! You can’t say it like that, you’re going to make this even—

“A good reason? Well, what is it? Tell me!” demanded Kuki.

Chifuyu hesitated. “I c-can’t.”

“You…can’t?” repeated Kuki incredulously. “Why not? Do you not want to tell me? Or is something keeping you from saying it?”

“I can’t because I can’t!”

“Tell me!”

“*No*! I’m never, *ever* telling you, Cookie!”

Chifuyu’s outright rejection hit Kuki like a truck. She stood there for a moment, clenching her teeth.

“Well…*fine*,” she finally said as the light faded from her eyes. “I get it… You like being with the literary club people more than me, right? And here I thought we were friends… I thought I was your *best* friend,” she muttered, her trembling voice growing weaker and weaker with every word.

Then, she picked up her bag, turned back for just long enough to say a feeble but final “Bye-bye,” and fled from the club room. Chifuyu didn’t try to stop her, nor did she try to chase after her. She just stood there, stunned, and watched her go.

And so, the literary club’s master plan to get Kuki to understand us ended in catastrophic failure.

Chapter 9: Best Friends

“Hmm—sounds like li’l miss Cookie’s got an incredible way of bringing out the sadist in a man. Strong-willed brats like her are just *asking* to get thoroughly and completely dominated.”

“…”

The next day at lunch time, I found myself once again profoundly regretting the decision to go to Sagami for advice.

“Dude. She’s an *elementary schooler*! That is *literally* a crime!”

“It’s not a crime to think about it. Freedom of thought’s a thing, and all that. Oh, if only I’d been born in the postwar era!”

“If only you’d get caught in a time warp and land in the *warring states* era.”

“That might not be so bad, as long as all the generals are gender-bent. I’d totally make out with Nobunaga or Masamune if they were hot chicks,” Sagami replied with an insufferable smile.

God, why does this freak have an answer for everything?

“But anyway,” Sagami continued, “it sure does sound like Chifuyu’s in a fix. Nobody likes fighting with their best friend. How’s she holding up?”

“She’s actually depressed, which is pretty rare for her.”

That might’ve been underselling it, even. Ever since Kuki had run out from the literary club’s room, it was like Chifuyu’s soul had left her body. She’d always been emotionally flat, but for the rest of the day, you could’ve mistaken her for an actual, literal mannequin.

“Oh? Depressed, is she? I sort of want to see that for myself. Something about those hard-to-read sorts of girls getting depressed just fires me up, you know?”

“Drop dead,” I countered, heaving a heavy sigh.

Sagami was totally useless, but at the very least, getting the whole situation off my chest had made me feel a *little* better about things. That was the thing about him—no matter how bad the situation was, to Sagami, someone else’s misfortune was always someone else’s problem and nothing more. That meant you could talk with him about anything, no matter how serious, and know he wouldn’t make a capital issue out of it.

No matter what I told him, Sagami wouldn’t try to act considerate and wouldn’t feel bad for me. You might think that meant he had no interest in other people, but that’s actually not quite right. If anything, Sagami was *more* interested in others than the average person would be. That’s probably why he went so far to draw a line between himself and the people he observed, and why he took great care to never, ever cross it.

No matter what happened, and no matter how many people or how much of the world it happened to, in Sagami Shizumu’s mind, it was never his problem. He held the world at a truly abnormal distance, but I was used to

that by now. I was used to our entire weird, messed up relationship, really. I'd been part of it since the eighth grade, so of course I was.

"Oh, by the way, the other day—"

I *almost* nonchalantly mentioned that I'd met with Tamaki, but backpedaled halfway through the sentence. *Is that actually a good idea? Would it even be okay for me to tell Sagami that I met her?*

"Hmm? The other day what?" asked Sagami, cocking his head.

If this were an eroge or a dating sim or whatever, this probably would've been the bit where I'd get to choose my next move. My options would've been:

1: Tell Sagami you met Tamaki
2: Keep it to yourself

The thing is, I had no idea how important of a decision it actually was. It could've been one of those flavor options that has absolutely nothing to do with what route you end up on, or it could've been one of those ultra vital ones that determines whether you end up at the true ending or an unceremonious bad ending.

"Nah, never mind, actually," I said, locking myself into option two. I didn't have any clear logic backing the choice up. I just sorta had a bad feeling about it, and that sourceless anxiety was enough to convince me not to mention Tamaki's name.

"Oh? Okay, back to talking about little girls, then," said Sagami. Thankfully, he didn't seem to make much of the exchange. "So, what's your plan? I certainly hope you're not thinking of letting the two of them sort it out on their own."

"Yeah, that's not really an option…"

I wanted to do *something* for them, of course, but I just couldn't come up with any decent ideas. How had the issue gotten so blown out of proportion, anyway? It was such a tiny argument to start with, but at the rate things were developing, Chifuyu and Kuki's friendship could be in danger of ending altogether. All Chifuyu had done was keep a secret from her best friend, but that simple fact combined with Kuki's understandable immaturity had been enough to hurt Kuki deeply.

"How about I step in and give you a hand?" suggested Sagami.

"Huh? *You*?" I asked incredulously.

"Like, say, what if I started going out with Kuki?"

"How the hell would that solve *anything*?!"

"She won't give half a damn about Chifuyu if she's head over heels for me, right? That's just how real-life girls work—the second they get a man, their friends end up playing second fiddle."

"Oh my god, please, just shut *up*! And besides, you've never even *seen* Kuki, much less met her! I can't *believe* you're actually sitting here talking about dating a girl you've never laid eyes on!"

“Oh, no worries there. My strike zone’s *really* broad when it comes to elementary schoolers.”

“I am *not* listening to this! Keep your dirty hands away from the elementary schoolers of the world, you lolicon sicko!”

“A lolicon, am I? Eh, can’t deny it. I do love me some little girls. But think about it, though—when all’s said and done, I’m only, what, six or seven years older than those two? It’s not really *that* big of a gap.”

“If this were exclusively about the age gap you’d have a point, but there’s all *sorts* of other ethical issues in play here, starting with the fact that they’re friggin’ *elementary schoolers*!” I took a deep breath, then stood up. “I do *not* want your help! You’ll *definitely* just make this a thousand times worse!”

“Oh? Okay, then,” said Sagami with a nod as I stormed out of the classroom.

It didn’t take me long to reach my destination: the staff room. I knocked on the door, let myself in, and walked straight over to Miss Satomi’s desk—that is, the desk of Satomi Shiharu, my homeroom teacher, our club advisor, and Chifuyu’s aunt. She was facedown on her desk and fast asleep yet again, though this time her eye mask had “Sleepy Boy Technique” printed on it. An empty lunch box was sitting out in front of her, so I assumed she was indulging in an after-meal siesta.

“Hey, Miss Satomi? I need you to wake up for a second,” I said.

Miss Satomi responded with a barely audible sleep-mumble. “Mnmmnmph… I can’t eat another bite…”

“Holy crap, seriously?!” Wow! Just, like, wow! People actually say that in real life?! That’s the single most generic way to sleeptalk in human history! Where’s my phone?! I’ve gotta record this!

“…Always wanted to say that at least once,” said a distinctly not asleep Miss Satomi as she sat up and dislodged her eye mask, totally ruining the little moment I was having. “So, what do you want, Andou?”

“Were you awake that whole time?” I sighed.

“You showed up just a second after I laid down for a nap, actually.”

So the sleep talk really was just a joke? Hey, that’s not fair! I had a moment over it and everything!

“C’mon, spit it out. What’d you go and ruin my nap for? I’m gonna punch you if it’s something stupid,” said Miss Satomi, cloaked in the menacing aura of a woman who’d just woken up and wasn’t happy about it.

Punch me? That’s it? Not feeling very creative with your threats of physical abuse today, are you? “It’s about Chifuyu,” I began. “So, uhh…did she go to school today?”

“Huh? Yeah, pretty sure. Just like usual.”

Well, that’s good, at least. I was afraid that Chifuyu would decide to drop out all over again, but apparently not. Though, actually…maybe the whole dropping out of elementary school thing had something to do with Kuki as

well? Something must've happened to make her hate the idea of going to school, anyway.

"She *was* acting a little strangely, though, now that you mention. This morning, Chifuyu…*got up on her own*."

I gasped. What?! She…err…got up…on her own…?

"Isn't that, umm, totally normal?"

"No…not even close. It's a downright bolt from the blue. Chifuyu, the princess of oversleeping, got up after her alarm clock went off *once*! Normally, she'd *never* wake up unless my sister went up there to do it in person! My sister actually called me this morning to ask if I thought she should take Chifuyu to the hospital. It's *that* abnormal."

I guess this means that either Chifuyu's mom is prone to overreacting, or Chifuyu's even worse at getting up in the morning than I'd always assumed.

"'Course, I was oversleeping at the time myself, and her call's all that kept me from being late this morning, so it all worked out, in a sense."

Wow, way to go, miss self-declared functional member of society!

"But, anyway…do you know something, Andou?" Miss Satomi asked with a notably more serious look than usual. Suddenly, the drowsiness had vanished from her gaze. Those weren't the eyes of a chronic napper—they were the eyes of a kindly aunt who just wanted the best for her niece.

"Well…okay, so, you see," I began, then launched into an honest explanation about what had happened the day before. That's actually what I came to the staff room to do in the first place.

"…and that's the whole story," I eventually concluded. I had to spin it to leave out our powers, of course, but somehow managed to make it coherent regardless.

Miss Satomi sank back into her chair. "I get the picture now. I've met Kuki more than a few times myself. She and Chifuyu play together all the time," she quietly muttered, her eyelids drooping listlessly. "You know that stuffed animal Chifuyu carries around everywhere? The one she calls Squirrely?"

"Yeah."

"Apparently, she forgot it at home today. Now that I know the whole story, it seems to me that was a sign of just how distracted she really is by all this."

Now *that* was a shock. Chifuyu leaving Squirrely at home wasn't just hard to imagine, it was downright unthinkable. She'd *always* carried him around with her, no exceptions, ever since I'd met her a year beforehand. He'd even been there on the day we'd gotten our powers—the day Chifuyu had obtained *World Create*.

Speaking of *World Create*, Chifuyu could make anything, up to and including a brand new Squirrely. And yet, she didn't. She'd made plenty of stuffed animals, but not once had I seen her duplicate her favorite one. I took that as a sign of just how precious he was to her and just how much value she placed on him.

“I was actually the one who gave Squirrely to her,” Miss Satomi mentioned offhandedly.

“You were? Really?”

“Yup. It’s a real keepsake I bought with the piddling remains of my pathetic salary,” she explained, seeming to lose herself in her memories for a moment as she went on. “Her parents—my sister and her husband, that is—are really busy people, and I ended up watching over Chifuyu a lot as she grew up. I was in college when she was three or four years old, so I had plenty of free time on my hands. Worked out pretty nicely.”

That made sense. Miss Satomi was in her late twenties, and Chifuyu was currently ten years old.

“Chifuyu and I used to play together all the time. We’d take naps in the afternoon, we’d go to sleep together, and we’d oversleep together in the morning too.”

Have you done anything with her that doesn’t involve sleeping?

“The thing is, though…ever since I became a teacher, it’s been harder and harder to make much time for her. You’d be surprised how busy this job can be! That’s why I gave her Squirrely as a present.”

“What, like a ‘he can keep you company while I’m too busy’ sort of deal?”

“Nah, wasn’t that dramatic or anything. I actually won it for her from a crane game.”

“A crane game?! Wait, though…what about all that ‘using the last of your pathetic salary to buy it’ talk?”

“I used the last of my pathetic salary to win it from a crane game.”

I guess that’s technically sorta the same thing, but I feel like it carries a pretty different nuance! Then again, now that she mentions it, it does sorta feel like I saw a plushie that looked a lot like Squirrely in a crane game way back whenever.

“Anyway, it was just a crane game prize, but Chifuyu took way more of a liking to it than I expected. She started carrying it around everywhere with her and even sleeping with it…”

We both fell silent. A moment later, Miss Satomi spoke up again in that oddly serious tone she broke out every once in a while.

“By the way, Andou—do you know why Chifuyu started hanging out in the literary club?”

My mind jumped to the obvious answer—that it was all because of our powers—but then it hit me that I was wrong. Chifuyu had *already* practically been a member of our club when our powers had awakened, and she had been for quite a long time.

“I’ve never actually asked her,” Miss Satomi continued, “but I’ve got a pretty educated guess.”

And then, in one swift summary, Miss Satomi gave me the full backstory of one Himeki Chifuyu.

That day after school, Chifuyu arrived at the literary club the same way she always did. Her expression wasn't the same as always, though. A distinct hint of sadness was staining the expressionless mask of indifference she usually wore.

"Hey, Chifuyu," I hesitantly opened, then decided to just go for it. "Did you try talking things through with Kuki today?"

"No," Chifuyu replied with a shake of her head. "Cookie and I...were still fighting today."

I guess neither of them could figure out how to close the distance, then. After the sort of total and complete falling out they'd had the day before, even just acting normal around each other had to be tough.

"Cookie wouldn't fix my ribbon. I had to do it myself..." murmured Chifuyu, pawing at the red ribbon around her collar.

The image of Kuki helping her retie it just a few days before immediately sprang to mind. Now that she mentioned it, her ribbon *did* look sloppier than usual. She'd probably hardly ever had to tie it herself.

"She wouldn't let me copy her homework either. Or eat the peppers in my lunch..."

"..."

"...or do my day duty work for me, or the cleaning I was supposed to do after school..."

"...Err."

"...or wake me up after homeroom finished... When I woke up, everyone else was already gone."

"I, uhh, I mean—"

"And she wouldn't guide me through the school, so I got lost in the hallways..."

"Okay, don't you think you're relying on her a little too much?!" Just how hopelessly dependent on Kuki is this girl?! C'mon, Kuki, you need to stop babying her like that! No wonder they call you her mom!

I could easily picture Kuki smiling, laughing, and giving Chifuyu a half-hearted lecture about how hopeless she'd be without Kuki around to help her, all while inadvertently encouraging the exact same behavior she's criticizing. Calling their relationship codependent seemed...maybe a *little* too harsh? But they certainly seemed like they might've been well on their way in that direction.

"How am I supposed to make it through school like this...?" Chifuyu muttered disconsolately.

"I mean...by taking care of yourself? That's what everyone else does."

"I have to find someone new to replace her soon."

"Holy crap, dispassionate much?!" Is this just how the next generation operates?! She doesn't care who her best friend is as long as they take care of her?!

"I was joking," said Chifuyu, letting out a little sigh. "Nobody can replace Cookie... Nobody," she muttered, hanging her head.

Chifuyu was *really* depressed. I'd never seen her that far down in the dumps before, and I could tell just how hard her fight with Kuki had hit her. They weren't codependent—nothing of the sort. They were just really, really good friends.

"Chifuyu… First off, I have to thank you," I said. "You never told Kuki about our powers, even after all this, and I really appreciate it."

"Yeah. We made a promise, so I didn't."

A promise indeed. Something closer to an oath, really. Half a year ago, when we had awakened to strange, unfathomable powers out of nowhere, we'd talked through our options time and time again. Finally, at the end of those countless debates, the five of us swore an oath with each other: never to tell anyone outside of our group about our powers, no matter what happened.

Not our families. Not our friends. Not our teachers. I guess we talked about them with Kudou, technically, but she was an exception.

"It seems that this time, that promise of ours has had the opposite of its intended effect," said Sayumi, jumping into the conversation.

She was right. Sure, the immediate origin of the problem was Chifuyu's attendance of the literary club and Kuki's perception that we were a bad influence, but what had caused the final, definitive rift in their friendship was yesterday's revelation that Chifuyu shared a secret with us that she wouldn't let Kuki in on, no matter what.

I guess you could call letting that fact slip Chifuyu's big mistake. Her big, *irreversible* mistake. I couldn't blame her for it, though. Sure, it was the worst way she could've possibly picked to dodge the question, but she'd been driven into a corner. The fact that she'd managed to end the conversation without revealing our powers was praiseworthy enough on its own.

"Chifuyu shares a secret with us, and she is unwilling to reveal that secret to Kuki," Sayumi summed up. "I imagine that to Kuki, those two facts put together are incredibly distressing."

"Right, but it's not like we can just let her in on the whole powers thing, so…we're kinda screwed," said Tomoyo, resting her head in her hands.

The room descended into an oppressive gloom, which was made all the worse when Chifuyu hung her head again and whispered to herself, "Are Cookie and I…never gonna be friends again…?"

Hatoko stood up, walked around the table, and sat down again next to Chifuyu. She smiled as she wrapped her arms around the little girl and gently stroked her head.

"It's all right, Chifuyu. You and Kuki will be friends again, I'm sure of it."

"Hatoko…"

"You wouldn't be able to fight like this if you *weren't* friends, you know?" Hatoko pointed out. Behind the kindness of her tone, it felt like I could hear an ever so slight trace of sadness. "Friends fight *because* they're so close

with each other. They get to know everything about each other, the good and the bad, and sometimes that means clashing."

Hatoko's words were like a beam of sunlight gently filtering through the canopy of a deep, dark forest, and they fell warmly upon Chifuyu's ears. She paused, hesitated, then finally nodded and said "Yeah" in her tiny little voice. Hatoko's honesty, her genuine words of comfort, had made it through to her.

Tomoyo, who was sitting next to me, leaned over to whisper in my ear. "Bet this sounds pretty familiar, huh?"

"Oh, shut up," I whispered back.

Hatoko couldn't have been more right on the mark. We'd experienced the same thing just the other day. We'd clashed because of how close to each other we were. I'm sure Hatoko hadn't meant to call me out, of course, but her words still hit home with me and sank in painfully deep. And with them driving me forward, there was no way I could sit still any longer.

"Milady Chifuyu!" I shouted, rising to my feet!

I had a *plan*. A girl sat before me, her head hung and her heart wounded. I walked over, stood before her, and then took a knee, bowing deeply. Once again, it was time for me to serve her. Just like I had on that fateful day—the day she'd slapped me on my almost entirely naked ass.

"Such gloom ill suits your lovely face, milady. I know you well—you are more free of spirit, more strong of will, and more pure of heart than any other. You are as unfettered as a frolicking fairy cavorting joyously by the lakeside. The brilliance of your innocent smile pierces through the frost that petrifies our hearts, melting it away like snow in the winter sunshine. *That* is the Lady Chifuyu I have pledged myself to."

My absurdly formal speech complete, I held out a hand to her, still kneeling in place.

"Wh-What's going on…?" whispered Hatoko. "Why's Juu talking like a weirdo? Ah, I mean, he always talks like a weirdo… B-But this feels different somehow…"

"He's shifted into a brand new chuuni mode," replied Tomoyo. "Looks like he's trying to be a knight this time."

"I have to say…I don't hate it," added Sayumi. "I could get used to seeing Andou bow down this freely."

The three other teens in the room each seemed weirded out in their own distinct ways, but I wasn't even listening. Nope, didn't notice the "Why would you pick *now* of all times to screw around?" atmosphere at all! I only had eyes for my lady Chifuyu! I looked upon her as the most noble and regal of princesses, and I swore an oath of absolute fealty!

"I, Guiltia Sin Jurai, do hereby pledge my service to you, Lady Chifuyu! Henceforth, I shall be your knight! I beg your leave, milady, to put my life on the line in service to your cause!"

"I friggin' *knew* he'd throw a 'shall' in there," muttered Tomoyo off to the side.

Hush, you! Can't you see this is the good part?! "A fiendish demon of nine heads has seen fit to bare its fangs at you, O Empress of Genesis! With the power of *Dark and Dark* mine to command, to slay the fiend would be the simplest of tasks. However, that would prove meaningless. For you see, the demon of nine heads...is none other than a kindly little girl who simply wants the best for her friend. Thus, I shall endeavor to return the beast to her original form!"

At first, Chifuyu just gaped blankly at me, but as my speech wore on, her expression slowly changed. Gradually, she looked upon me not as an unfathomable mystery, but as her hope for salvation. And finally, in a voice so quiet I could barely hear her, she made her request.

"Andou... Will you help me be friends with Cookie again...?"

"Your joy is my joy, Milady, and your sorrow my own in kind. If such is your wish, I shall shoulder any sin, stain my name with any dishonor, and do it with a smile!"

"Then...do it. Do it, Andou—no..."

Halfway through, Chifuyu's words trailed off and she shook her head. She paused for a moment, searching her memories, then spoke once more.

"Umm... Do it, Guiltia Sin Jurai."

My heart pounded with a heavy, rhythmic *thud*. She'd spoken my true name, the name carved deep within my very soul, and with its invocation, a surge of power rushed through me. With the royal decree of my princess to drive me forward, I no longer had anything to fear.

"Yes, your highness!"

Now—let us begin the end of the beginning!

Chapter 10: The Code of Chivalry

The very next thing I did was return home to collect my trusty steed, Fenrir. No proud knight would be caught dead without his trusty steed, after all! Also, the piano school Kuki took her lessons at was pretty far away and walking would've been a pain, but that wasn't the *real* reason, I promise.

"Away, Fenrir! Fly, swift and powerful as a raging hurricane!"

"Shaddup!"

"Gwaugh?!"

"Quit talking to your bike, you crazy little jackass! And actually, quit kicking up a racket outside in general! You're bothering the neighbors!"

"M-Machi," I moaned from the ground, "you can't go kicking people's bikes like that, seriously..."

The distraction of my older sister (who must've just arrived home from college) overcome, I set off! I sped away, pumping my legs in perfect adherence to the golden ratio and sending Fenrir's wheels into a state of the Spin! Together, we shot through the city streets, making a beeline for our destination at a pace so fast, we came dangerously close to tearing through the boundary between this dimension and the next one!

In the end, I spent around thirty minutes waiting in front of Kuki's piano school before she finally emerged through the front door, took one look at me, and gasped, her eyes wide and her expression stiff as a board.

"Wh-What do *you* want...?" asked Kuki, her voice absolutely dripping with wariness. She held her hand at the ready, as tense as a gunman waiting to draw—though in her case, she was going for the personal alarm on her backpack rather than a six-shooter on her belt.

"Wait, wait, wait! Hands off the buzzer, please! I won't do anything to you, I promise!" If she pulled that thing outside, I'd seriously be up a creek without a paddle! And maybe I was imagining it, but it sort of seemed like her reaction speed was a hair sharper than it had been the day before. *Did she practice going for her alarm last night just in case I showed up again?*

"I just want to talk, okay?" I said, slowly and calmly. "You take the bus here, right? All I ask is that you hear me out while you wait for the next bus to show up. Is that okay?"

"H-How did you know I take the bus here?" asked Kuki. "And wait, how do you know I take lessons here at all? D-Don't tell me...you've been stalking me...?"

"*Nooo*, absolutely *not*!" I shouted frantically, then paused to sigh. "Chifuyu told me, that's all."

Kuki froze solid, and I continued. "We can chat while you walk to the bus stop. Okay?"

“So? You wanted to talk about Chii, right?” muttered Kuki as we made our way to her bus stop.

The sky was already beginning to darken overhead, but since we were on a fairly crowded and well-lit street, it didn’t feel like nighttime quite yet. I was pushing my bike, and Kuki was walking by my side. I kept my pace nice and slow to make sure I matched her walking speed.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I replied.

“In that case, this is my and Chii’s problem. It has nothing to do with you, Andou, so stay out of it,” snapped Kuki, shutting me down preemptively. Her attitude had a bit of that classical childish stubbornness to it, but I also felt a degree of strong and genuine willpower behind her words.

“Did you talk with her at all today?” I asked in spite of her denial. I knew the answer already, of course, which probably made it a little mean of me to even bring it up. Kuki didn’t reply, though, so I decided to double down with another question. “Are you just done with her? Don’t want to be friends anymore?”

“Of course not!” Kuki snapped without hesitation, then paused before continuing in a quiet, subdued tone. “But...Chii doesn’t care about me at all. I thought we were friends... I thought she was my best friend...”

“So, Chifuyu turned up to the literary club today,” I said. “And y’know what? She was *really* down in the dumps. I’ve never seen her look that depressed before.”

“Then why don’t you *literary club* people cheer her up, or something? Chii likes *you* way better than me, after all,” grumbled Kuki with a scowl. “I let her copy my homework, I eat her leftovers for her, I do all her chores and cleaning, and I even apologize with her when the teachers get mad at her... And that’s not even the half of it! I do so, so much for Chii, all the time, but she never, ever cared... I’m such an idiot... It’s like she was just *using* me...”

This time, I didn’t say anything. Frankly, I couldn’t really deny it. Chifuyu exuded a “please take care of me” aura, and Kuki had let herself get thoroughly steeped in it.

“But...it looks like Chii really loves you and your club,” continued Kuki after a lengthy pause. “You people are all she talks about lately. She sounded so happy, and I was just...so frustrated... So, I...”

...told her to stop going to the literary club. The conclusion was left unstated, but I could put together the pieces. I’d sort of expected as much; the claim that she’d done it out of worry for Chifuyu was a lie after all. Well, maybe not a *total* lie, but it was clear now that her biggest reason was that classic elementary school impulse to want to be someone’s absolute best friend, and nothing less.

Okay, cut that out. What am I doing? This is no time to be psychoanalyzing the poor girl and picking out her faults! It wasn’t even that

complicated. Kuki was just scared of losing her friend—that's all there was to it.

But in the face of Kuki's worries and mixed feelings, Chifuyu had refused to heed her advice. I could only imagine how much more anxious that must have made her. How would it feel to have your best friend totally ignore your warnings and go hang out with some other group in spite of your apprehensions?

And then, worst of all, there's what happened yesterday, when Kuki learned that Chifuyu had some sort of secret with that same group of suspicious strangers—a secret that she'd never share with Kuki, no matter what. And so, all of Kuki's worries and feelings for her friend came back around to hurt her feelings deeply.

"Do you know why Chifuyu started hanging out with us?" I asked.

"Because her aunt's your teacher, right? Chii told me that she's the one who took her to your school."

"Yeah, that's basically true."

I'd met Chifuyu just about a year ago, a short while before our powers awakened. It was the spring of my first year in high school, just a little after I'd joined the literary club. There'd actually been a lot of drama between me and Sayumi revolving around my potential membership, come to think of it, but looking back, it all seems more funny than anything else.

Anyway, I'd joined the club, and Tomoyo and Sayumi were finally starting to open up to me, when our advisor, Miss Satomi, brought her niece one day. "So, uhh, this is Chifuyu," she'd told us. "She's my older sister's kid, and I was supposed to keep her company today, but this meeting came up at the last second. Sorry, but would you mind watching over her here for a bit?"

And that was that. Ever since then, Chifuyu had been one of us.

"But that's just how it started," I continued. "There's another reason she kept coming to the club after that first time."

And so, I recounted everything I'd learned from Miss Satomi earlier that afternoon.

"The thing is," Miss Satomi told me, "Chifuyu's what they call a latchkey kid."

"A...latchkey kid?"

"Like I said earlier, my sister's and her husband's jobs keep them both really busy. They get home late at night more often than not. Chifuyu doesn't have any siblings either, so she always ends up waiting at home alone for her parents to get back."

An image of the big, empty Himeki household floated into my mind's eye. Chifuyu's been coming home to an empty house day after day? Nobody around to welcome her home—just that cavernous living room and deafening silence to greet her? Suddenly, I felt incredibly embarrassed by my own over-the-top home-alone antics.

“They tried sending her to lessons to keep her occupied after school once, but you know how moody that girl can be. She didn’t last long with any of them.”

That was easy for me to believe. Chifuyu seemed fundamentally poorly suited for after-school lessons.

“She’s a good girl at heart, though,” continued Miss Satomi. “Never complained a peep about being left at home alone. Once kids get old enough to go to elementary school, they tend to just put up with stuff like this.”

She was probably right, much as I hated to admit it. Who knew how many kids there were in the world who had parents that were a little on the busy side? It was the sort of misfortune you couldn’t complain about, the sort of tragedy it felt petty to acknowledge. It wasn’t something you could claim to be traumatized by or develop some big complex about. In fact, it was a matter most people would consider trifling.

“Plenty of families are way worse than yours,” people would tell you. “Everyone has something like that they have to put up with, so you just have to suck it up too.” And so your loneliness, your petty sense of isolation, would be swept under the rug. But still, though…

“Still, though, that doesn’t change the fact that she’s lonely,” said Miss Satomi as she looked me right in the eye. “And for Chifuyu, the literary club’s the best possible place she could go to kill time. I guess you could say it’s her equivalent of a daycare…though they’d probably call it an after-school childcare center or something these days.”

“A childcare center…” I was vaguely familiar with the concept. They were places that busy parents could send their kids to after school, basically. A place that would take care of their kids when they were so busy with work, they couldn’t make it home.

Yeah, actually, that sounds about right. We really *were* sort of like a childcare center, as far as Chifuyu was concerned. And considering that, it could very well be that Miss Satomi had tolerated Chifuyu’s constant visits to our school because she sympathized with Chifuyu’s situation. Because she knew how lonely Chifuyu was.

“’Course, I don’t exactly feel great about more or less shoving my niece off on my students to take care of,” Miss Satomi added.

“None of us have ever seen it that way,” I immediately replied. Maybe we *were* something close to a childcare center in terms of function, but we absolutely did *not* think of it as us taking care of her. “Chifuyu’s one of us. She’s our friend.”

We wanted to be together, so we were. It was as simple as that.

“Gotcha,” said Miss Satomi with a nod. “Yeah, when you put it that way, I guess you’re the sort of person who gets taken care of, not the sort of person who takes care of other people.”

“Huh? Wait, no, that’s not what I—”

“Anyway, I don’t think there’s much of anything I can do to help with the Kuki situation. It’d be pretty lame for an adult to butt into kids’ arguments,

right?” Miss Satomi leaned forward and slapped a hand onto my shoulder. “I’ll leave all that kid stuff to an actual kid.”

“Got it,” I replied…even though the way she was treating me like a child was really obnoxious.

“Oh… Is that all? Really? She was just lonely…?”

By the time I finished telling my story, Kuki and I had arrived at the bus stop. We still had a little time before the bus was scheduled to show up, though, so we sat down on a nearby bench.

Kuki knew Chifuyu’s reasons for hanging out with the literary club now, but she still didn’t seem totally satisfied. “When I heard there was a reason for it, I was expecting…I don’t know, something *bigger*, I guess.”

“Like some huge, secret trauma, or deep-seated emotional wounds, or something?”

“I-I didn’t say that…”

“It’s fine if you thought it, though. I thought the same thing, at first.” A dramatic, traumatic backstory really *would’ve* been a lot more immediately convincing. Convincing, sure, but not right, for a number of reasons. “It’s kinda just like Chifuyu, though, isn’t it? Of course her reason would be nice and simple.”

She was lonely. That’s all. It was a perfectly valid reason in and of itself.

“I…guess you’re right,” admitted Kuki with a chagrined nod.

I turned to look her in the eye. “I hope you understand why we want to keep spending time with Chifuyu now, Kuki. It’s partially for her sake, sure, but it’s for ours as well. We need her. And we’re not the only ones—you do too, right? Well, what’s the problem with that? Why be worried about who her best friend is when we can say we’re *all* her best friends?”

“*All* of us…?”

“People give the educational system crap for being too light on competition these days, but not putting numbers on people isn’t *always* a bad thing.”

Kuki fell silent for a moment, thoroughly considering what I’d told her. Unfortunately, if the look on her face was anything to go by, she wasn’t convinced.

“Okay,” she finally said, “but what about that secret Chifuyu mentioned? The one she’s keeping with you?”

“That’s, uhh…”

“You can’t tell me, right…? I get it. It’s fine.”

“Kuki…don’t you think it’s normal for good friends to have a secret or two they keep from each other?”

“I know! I know, but…I still don’t *like* it. I hate it when people lie to me and keep stuff secret from me…”

A deep sense of despair emanated from her downturned eyes. As I suspected, *that* was the definitive issue for her. The fact that her best friend was keeping secrets from her had hurt Kuki even more than I’d imagined.

And who could blame her? Nothing's more alienating than learning that your friends are hiding something from you, especially when you're at an emotionally sensitive age like she was.

But she *was* at that age, and as she grew up, I knew that she'd come to understand that sometimes, little secrets and white lies are vital to keeping a relationship going. She'd realize that there's no such thing as a human relationship completely untouched by falsehood. Considerate omissions, lip service, lies of convenience, excuses, insincere compromises... When you look at all of those things in a negative light, interpersonal relationships are built upon a foundation of deceit.

It's simply not possible for two people to understand everything there is to know about each other. Just look at Hatoko and I—how our misunderstandings led to us clashing, and how we reconciled without ever amending them. The fact that we *did* reconcile in the end made our situation better than some, though, and the perfect counterexample had practically smacked me in the face just the day before.

Sometimes things don't end well. Sometimes you end up like Sagami and Tamaki, never understanding the first thing about each other from the beginning to the catastrophic end.

Once you wreck things up, they never go back to how they used to be.

Suddenly, a memory bubbled up from the depths of my mind. A memory of the time when Sagami called me Jurai and I called him Sagamin, with all the affection a nickname like that implied. The era when the two of us were under the happy misapprehension that we could ever be best friends. The time when I hurt Tamaki, was let down by Sagami, and was finally saved by Hatoko.

People can never truly understand each other. That's the one thing I learned while I was in the eighth grade—the one truth I gleaned from the darkest blot on my personal record.

But that was all adult stuff. Kuki didn't need to learn any of those awful truths now. Those could wait until she grew up a little. And besides, I didn't want her *or* Chifuyu to go through the sort of misery I experienced in the eighth grade. They could learn little by little, gaining experience as they faced down the struggles the world would inevitably inflict upon them.

I knew it was egotistical of me to think that way, but still, I didn't want them to end up like us. No matter what it took, I never wanted to let them be like Andou Jurai and Sagami Shizumu, the best friends who just couldn't.

And so...I gulped. It was finally time to reveal the card I'd kept up my sleeve throughout the whole conversation.

"Kuki," I said, speaking as gently and quietly as I could to the sad little girl beside me, "if it means that much to you...I'll tell you our secret."

"Huh...?"

“Just don’t blame Chifuyu, okay? I told her that she couldn’t tell anyone else about this, no matter what. She was just keeping her promise, that’s all.”

“She promised you…?”

“Right. Can you do the same? Will you promise me that you’ll never, ever reveal what I’m about to tell you to anyone else?”

“I-I will!” shouted Kuki, looking up at me and nodding vigorously. She waited for my next words, eyes full of hope and resolve.

All right, it’s time. Time to play my trump card. Time…to…

“…”

Gaaah, I don’t wanna! I really don’t wanna play this stupid card! I’d come up with this plan myself, sure, but it was supposed to be the last resort to end all last resorts! If there was anything I could’ve done to get out of using it, I would’ve done it in a heartbeat! And to make matters worse, it was a plan I’d come up with thanks to *Sagami*, of all the people!

But there was no use complaining about it. I wasn’t talking with Kuki on behalf of myself—I was talking with her on behalf of Princess Chifuyu, playing the role of her most trusted of knights. I had sworn that for her sake, I would drag my name through the mud. For her sake, I would bear the weight of any sin with a smile!

“The truth is, Kuki, that I’m…”

I took a deep breath, then another, and I hardened my resolve. And then I said it. *Have a taste of the ace up my sleeve!*

“I’m a lolicon!”

And the world ground to a screeching halt.

For a second, I wondered if I’d finally awakened to my own version of *Closed Clock* or if I’d managed to invade DIO’s world of stopped time, but needless to say, nothing of the sort had happened.

Kuki just stood there, stiff as a board, completely silent. When she finally opened her mouth, it took so much effort that her shoulders shook, and she had to flap her lips a couple times before she actually managed to squeeze any sound out from them.

“U-U-Umm…”

“I’m a lolicon.”

“No, that’s not—I mean, I *heard* you…”

“Oh! Right, sorry. ‘Lolicon’ is an abbreviation of ‘lolita complex.’ To put it simply, the term refers to people who get turned on by young or prepubescent girls. The origins of the word trace back to Vladimir Nabokov ’s *Lolita*, which is a novel about—”

“Again, it’s not that I don’t know what ‘lolicon’ means! It’s just…” Kuki paused for a moment, blinking rapidly in confusion. “A-Andou, you’re a *lolicon*? I mean…*huh*? S-Seriously…?”

“Seriously,” I declared with a nod of utmost gentlemanly sincerity. “I’m a lolicon.”

“S-So, then…y-you really are a p-per…a perv…”

“Correct,” I agreed with a nod of utmost gentlemanly confidence. “I’m a pervert.”

Yes, indeed! On this day, here and now, I am nothing more than a solitary knight, willing to go to any lengths for the sake of Her Highness, Chifuyu! I shall bear the stigma of perversion with pride! I shall accept the brand of the lolicon with a smile!

“Yes, I am a trueborn lolicon! My strike zone for girls spans from the ages of seven to twelve! In short, elementary school girls are the *exclusive* subjects of my interest! I might lower my standards all the way down to kindergarten or preschool age from time to time, I’ll admit, but moving them *upward* is absolutely out of the question!”

“Eek!”

“And just being an elementary schooler doesn’t necessarily give you a free pass! The moment a girl starts wearing a bra, she ceases to be a girl in my eyes! The brassiere is an accursed shackle forced upon humanity by the devil himself! Oh, incidentally, it’s not that I’m into flat chests, specifically. It’s immature, *underdeveloped* chests that I like.”

“Eeek!”

“Any girl who isn’t prepubescent isn’t a girl at all!”

“A-Ahh…”

“A girl who’s had her first period may as well be an old hag!”

“U-Ugggh…”

“My favorite Ghibli movie is *My Neighbor Totoro*!”

“That’s just a plain old good movie! But!”

“My dream career’s to be a nursery or elementary school teacher!”

“That’s a perfectly respectable dream! *But*!”

“Good *grief*, elementary schoolers are just the *best*!”

“G-Gaaahhh!”

“I don’t even care *who* I go after. It may as well be you.”

“Noooooooooo!”

My Kurapika impression seemed to have dealt the finishing blow, and Kuki’s hand shot up toward her personal alarm at a terrifying speed! It wasn’t just a threat this time—she was seriously going for it! And, as expected, she pulled her buzzer’s tab without so much as a second’s hesitation!

Too bad, though! I’d seen this coming a mile away! Before she could stop me, I snatched the alarm off her backpack and reinserted the tab at light speed! In the end, its grating, screeching siren had only played for a fraction of a second.

Mwa ha ha! You’ve overplayed your hand, Kuki! You didn’t seriously think you could threaten me with that alarm over and over and not have me develop a countermeasure for it, did you? You can’t go revealing your trump

cards in advance like that! Or if you do, you need to make sure you have another, trumpier card hidden in reserve!

"Y-You know how to shut off a personal alarm that quickly…? Wh-What sort of career criminal are you?!"

Oh. I, uhh, guess that does sorta logically follow, doesn't it?

"O-Oh, god, an actual pervert… Y-You really were a real pervert this whole time! That really *is* why you were walking around Chii's house in your underwear! G-Get away from me!"

Kuki already suspected me of being a pervert. As such, it was incredibly easy for her to believe that I was a lolicon on top of it. Things were playing out pretty much exactly as I'd expected them to, and—also just as expected—Kuki shot up from the bench. She was ready to bolt off into the distance, screaming like a banshee, but I managed to grab her by the wrist before she could make a break for it.

"L-Let *go*! Somebody, help!"

"Kuki, please!" I shouted, looking her right in the eye with the most serious, earnest expression I'd shown her so far. "Are you the same as everyone else? Do you carry the same discriminatory bias toward lolicons as the rest of society?!"

"O-Of course I do!" Kuki shouted back after a moment of confused hesitation. "I mean…lolicons are all freaks, aren't they?!"

"Chifuyu doesn't think so." The instant her best friend's name entered the picture, the look on Kuki's face shifted dramatically. I pressed on. "She's never looked down on me just because I'm a lolicon. She's *never* made fun of me for it—not even once. She tried to learn about me instead of scorning me. She asked me to teach her what a lolicon is and tried to understand me…"

As I spoke on, I found my words taking on an emotional tinge. Everything I'd said up to that point was an act, but there was a certain element of truth to this part, at least. If you just replaced the word "lolicon" with "chuuni," it would actually have been pretty darn close to my genuine feelings.

"The society we live in was designed to sweep minorities under the rug," I continued. "All I want is to say that I like the things I like—to do the things I want to do! And that's all it takes for the world around me to slap me with an epithet like 'lolicon'…"

"An *epithet*…?"

"That's right—and so, I want to destroy that epithet itself! I want to stand tall and proud, declaring the things I love for the whole world to hear!"

Yes, I would say it aloud! I'd shout it out, standing taller, prouder, and cooler than anyone else!

"A lolita complex isn't a sickness! It's a way of life!"

And with that, Kuki…wasn't even remotely convinced, but at the very least, I'd given her enough to think about that she wasn't trying to run away anymore. In fact, she quietly sat back down beside me.

"Y-Yes, fair enough," she murmured. "I'm sorry. You're right. I shouldn't have acted so prejudiced against you just because you're attracted to little girls."

I, umm... I dunno about that, actually. Her sincere apology made me feel more than a little worried about her future in a whole new way. If she ever met an actual, for real self-admitted lolicon, ideally I'd want her to turn the prejudice up to eleven and run away at full speed. That, however, was a problem that could wait for another day.

"I hope you can understand now, Kuki. I'm absolutely head over heels for Chifuyu."

"*Huh*?!"

"I'm absolutely head over heels for Chifuyu." That's right! It's so important that I said it twice! And oh, god, the shame burns, but I just have to push through it!

"Wh-Wh-What're you saying?!" squealed Kuki. "Chii's an elementary schooler!"

"Right! Exactly!"

"Oh my god, you lolicon *creep*!"

"See?! You're doing it again! Everyone always jumps right to discriminating against us lolicons!" I slammed my fist into the bench to emphasize my righteous anger. "What's so bad about loving elementary schoolers?! What's so messed up about cute little girls making your heart race?!"

I was really putting my all into it this time, and Kuki looked taken aback by the intensity of my speech. I mean, okay, maybe she looked more disgusted than taken aback. Even I had to admit that I was making myself look astonishingly, gag-inducingly creepy, but I'd committed too hard to pull out.

"You know, deep down…deep down, even I understand! I *know* that I'm messed up… I *know* that I'm an irredeemable degenerate… But still, in spite of all that, Chifuyu accepted me! She accepted me as I am, faults and all…"

"She…*accepted* you?"

"What I mean is that even though I'm a pervert, she was still willing to spend time with me! Being with Chifuyu's all it took to grant salvation to my twisted heart! That little girl's innocent, immaculate soul cleansed me of all my impurities! Ever since I met her, I've felt absolutely no desire whatsoever to do *anything* ethically dubious. Playing with Chifuyu—playing with a cute little girl—is more than enough to satisfy me!"

A long, awkward silence passed before Kuki simply replied, "Oh. Okay." She was looking at me the way most people look at a particularly pungent compost heap—a look overflowing with only the purest disgust and contempt. I genuinely don't think I could've been any more loathsome in her

eyes. Her favorability meter for me had started well into the negative digits, and now I could say with great certainty it had completely bottomed out.

Kuki hesitated for a moment longer, then let out a heavy sigh. “So, umm… I guess *that’s* Chii’s secret? *That’s* why she can’t stop going to the literary club? I understand now… Chii was keeping it secret because it was a private matter of yours. When it comes down to it, though, it’s kind of, well… I guess it’s a lot dumber of a secret than I was expecting.”

“If you’re gonna open Pandora’s Box, you have to live with whatever comes out of it.”

“*Excuse* me? Quit trying to make yourself sound cool, mister pervert,” snapped Kuki with a terrifyingly frigid glare.

“Right. Sorry.” Looks like I’m firmly classified as sub-human in her mind. Wow, this hurts…but however much it feels like my heart’s been torn to shreds, this is all going more or less just as planned! And hey, getting looked down on by a little girl every once in a while isn’t so bad…or so I’m told, anyway.

In any case, I’d done everything I possibly could, and I’d managed to pull it off while keeping our powers completely off the table. My part in this charade was over—the rest was up to *her*.

“Cookie,” a youthful voice rang out. I looked up to find that at some point, a small blue car had pulled up in front of the bus stop. Its back door opened, and Chifuyu alighted before us.

“Chifuyu…?” I said, stunned. “How did you get here?”

“I asked Shiharu to bring me,” replied Chifuyu. I glanced over and, sure enough, Miss Satomi was sitting in the driver’s seat. It seemed she’d given Chifuyu a lift. “I thought it’d be bad to leave it all to you.”

Ha ha ha… Yeah, I get it. She was absolutely right. Only the people who were directly involved could really solve a problem like this. No more lies; no more deception. The time had come for true friendship to take the stage.

“Ch-Chii…” said Kuki.

“Cookie…this is for you.” Chifuyu held an adorable stuffed bear out to her friend. Its design was cartoony but simple, with a white stripe around its neck.

“Is this…an Asian black bear?” muttered Kuki. “And is it just me, or does it look a little like Squirrely…?”

She was right. The bear bore an unmistakable resemblance to Chifuyu’s favorite stuffed squirrel. I had to assume it was part of the same product line or something.

“I went to the arcade with Shiharu to get it. I wanted to give it to you,” explained Chifuyu. “It’s a make-up present.”

“Chii…”

“I like the literary club. I like Andou, and Tomoyo, and Hatoko, and Sayumi too. That’s why I want to keep going to the club… But I like *you* too, Cookie. I like all of you so, so much…so I…I…” Chifuyu paused. Her tiny

voice was shaking with fear and anxiety. “Cookie... I don’t wanna stop being friends...”

She finally spit it out. Her true, unadulterated feelings were finally clear.

“I’m so sorry, Chii!” shouted Kuki. “I was just scared... I was afraid those high schoolers would steal you away from me! You sounded so happy whenever you talked about them, and I just got so jealous because...because I like you so, so much too...”

Kuki took the stuffed bear, clutching it with all her might as pure sentiment drove her onward. “Me too... I want to be friends again too...”

I let out a sigh of relief. Looks like the dynamic duo’s finally back together! I guess when it comes down to it, neither of them really stopped liking the other at any point along the way. They both wanted to make up from the very beginning. Heck, if I’d just taken a step back and not gotten involved, would they have made up on their own?

“I’m sorry, Chii,” said Kuki. “I had no idea that Andou would turn into a social pariah if you weren’t there for him! I never even considered that he could be *that* much of a freak...”

...If I hadn’t gotten involved, could I have not publicly humiliated myself and earned Kuki’s everlasting contempt?

“It’s okay, Cookie. It’s not your fault that Andou’s so hopeless.”

I *did* tell everyone in the literary club my plan, for what it’s worth, including Chifuyu. Weird, then, that she sounded so sincere about that last part. Wonder why that could’ve been?

“Cookie...you’ll keep taking care of me from now on, right?”

“Yeah!” Kuki agreed emphatically.

Waaait a second—are you sure you want to go back to square one on that part? Hmm... I mean, I guess if it works for them, that’s what really matters.

“Oh, right—Cookie, let me see your plushie.” Kuki passed Chifuyu the stuffed bear, which Chifuyu then held out to me. “Give him a name, Andou.”

“Huh? You want *me* to name him?”

“Yeah. I do.”

I wasn’t expecting to become a godparent today! It felt sort of nice, but it also meant I was under a *lot* of unexpected pressure to come up with something good.

“Hmm, let’s see...” I muttered, looking up at the sky as I lapsed into thought. The void above us was scattered with stars, and the light of the waning moon shone faintly down upon us. *There’s a crescent moon out tonight, and the stuffed animal’s an Asian black bear—a species colloquially known as the moon bear... Hmm...*

“All right, got it! His name shall be Neo-Lunatic—”

“Actually, you name him, Cookie.” Chifuyu snatched the plushie out of my hands and returned it to its owner.

Wait, but—oh, c’mon! You could’ve at least waited until I was finished!

“Okay, then...how about Moonie?” suggested Kuki. “You know, since he’s a moon bear.”

“I like it. That’s a good name. Moonie and Cookie,” said Chifuyu. Then she turned around, trotted over to the car, pulled out her matching stuffed squirrel, rushed back over to us, and held Squirrely up in front of her face.

“Oi, you over there! You the new rookie I’ve been hearin’ all ’bout? What’cher name, punk?” said Chifuyu, doing her very best—which was not good at all—to pull off a ventriloquist act in a horribly stilted fake accent. She still hadn’t figured out how to keep her jaw from jutting out conspicuously in the process. It was the surprise return of Chifuyu’s misaligned jaw that literally nobody asked for.

For a second, Kuki looked baffled, but a moment later she seemed to resolve herself with a little nod. Then she raised Moonie up to her face...

Wait, seriously? Sh-She’s going for it? Is she really planning on playing along with the ventriloquist shtick?

“H-Heya, bud, m’name’s Moonie,” mumbled Kuki, blushing brightly as she did her best imitation of Chifuyu’s act.

Part of me wanted to tell her she didn’t have to play along with her friend if it was *that* embarrassing for her, but a moment later, I thought better of it. This was, after all, just another way in which Kuki was dedicated to taking care of Chifuyu. *She really didn’t have to imitate the accent, though.*

“Oh? Moonie, eh? Nice li’l name you’ve got fer yerself, pal!”

“Th-Thanks, err, pal...”

“You can call me Squirrely! Real nice to meetcha, Moonie.”

“R-R-Real nice to meetcha too...”

On the one hand, you had Chifuyu/Squirrely, going all-in on the ridiculous accent without a hint of shame. On the other hand, you had Kuki/Moonie, flagrantly copying Chifuyu’s speech patterns and ashamed beyond measure. And oh. My. *God*, if it wasn’t just the cutest friggin’ thing I’d ever seen! It was a scene so overpoweringly sweet, I was in danger of contracting diabetes on the spot!

“You’d better take care o’ Miss Cookie, eh, Moonie? She’s Chifuyu’s best friend! Y’got that?”

“I-I got that...”

Their ventriloquism was so low-quality that I could feel myself starting to blush just listening to them, but one look at their faces was enough to tell that they were both having the time of their lives.

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And so, the book closed on my tale of chivalrous knighthood. The nine-headed demon had turned back into the kindhearted little girl she used to be, the Empress of Genesis had found her smile once more, and they all lived happily ever after.

The End.

Epilogue

“Oh, I see the Lolicon Knight’s decided to grace us with his presence today!” Tomoyo snickered as I walked into our club room the next day after school.

“Shaddup,” I snapped. “And don’t call me that! You shall address me only as the Knight of Knights!”

Unfortunately, Tomoyo wasn’t the only one with a sarcastic grin on her face this time around.

“So, Juu was a lolicon this whole time? Boy, he’s just a boatload of trouble, isn’t he?”

“Yes, I would have to say that ‘the Lolicon Knight’ is a much more suitable title for Andou than any of the ones he’s come up with so far.”

Ugh! I was being mercilessly teased from all directions. I did my best to come up with something, *anything* I could say to defend myself, but before I had any good ideas, Chifuyu trotted up to me.

“Andou, look, look,” she said, pointing at her own head. I looked, and to my surprise, I found that she had her hair tied up in pigtails. “Cookie did my hair for me.”

“Oh, cool,” I replied. “Looks like you two are the fastest of friends again, huh?”

“Yeah. Hey, am I cute, Andou?” she asked, looking up at me with hope in her eyes.

Yeah, she was ridiculously cute. Her cuteness levels were so high, I’d have to crush my scouter if I were holding one. *Could any hairstyle possibly suit a little girl better than pigtails? I think not!*

“Yup, you sure are,” I replied in complete honesty. I got a bashful smile from her in exchange.

“Okay, then...Andou? Do you like me?”

“Huh...? Err, I mean, yeah? I guess?”

“Okay,” said Chifuyu with a nod, followed by a mischievous smile. “Then you really are a lolicon!”

What followed could be more or less characterized as the four of them surrounding me and chanting “Lolicon! Lolicon!” over and over and over again. *Gaaah, fine! Call me a lolicon! See if I care!*

Eventually, though, they got tired of making fun of me and Chifuyu spoke up again. “Hey, Andou? How old were you when you graduated elementary school?”

“Huh? Umm, twelve. Pretty sure most people are twelve when they graduate, actually.”

“Twelve... I’m ten, so I have two more years. That’s so long...”

It was easy enough to surmise that Chifuyu was in a hurry to graduate from elementary school, and that knowledge sparked a pang of worry within me. Oh, right. I’d totally forgotten, but we never got a clear answer for why

Chifuyu wanted to drop out of school, did we? I sort of assumed that the whole Kuki affair had something to do with it, but if it's still on her mind, then maybe I was wrong?

"Hey, Chifuyu? Do you hate going to elementary school or something?" I asked tentatively.

Chifuyu cocked her head in confusion. "No. I like school. It's always really fun, and I have lots and lots of friends. Cookie and I aren't fighting anymore either."

"O-Okay, so... It's not like you don't want to go to elementary school or anything?"

"Yeah. Why?" she asked, turning the question back around on me without hesitation. She didn't seem to be trying to lie to me or cover anything up.

Huuuh... That's weird. I was so sure that something had happened to make her hate school. I just had to get to the truth of the matter, so I decided to press onward with my questioning.

"In that case, why did you decide you wanted to drop out of school the other day?"

"Oh, that," Chifuyu said, then hesitated for a moment before continuing. "I thought that if I quit elementary school, I could go to high school instead."

For a second, I thought I must have misheard her. She thought she could go to *high school*? "You mean, like...*this* high school? Senkou High?"

Chifuyu nodded bashfully. "Yeah. I don't like being the only one who's not a high schooler. I wanted to be a real club member, like all of you."

We were a five-member club. I'd always thought of us that way, and I think everyone else was right there with me. But as far as the school's records were concerned, the literary club had only *four* members in total. Needless to say, Himeki Chifuyu's name was not present on their official list.

"B-But then," I stammered, "why'd you play hooky the other day...?"

"Because I wanted to study."

"To *study*? Wait—you mean you took the day off school so that you could stay home and *study* instead?"

"You said that I couldn't drop out of elementary school, so I thought I could skip some grades instead."

"Skip some grades?!"

"I thought that if I skipped a few grades, I could be a high schooler."

Wow! This girl can really *think outside the box!* The rest of the story followed pretty logically: there was no way she'd be able to skip grades if she was learning the same things at the same pace as everyone else, so she thought she could self-study at home and speed on ahead instead.

"But it didn't work..." added Chifuyu, a little downcast. "All the stuff I tried to learn was too hard, so I stopped." In the end, her plan to self-study her way into high school had ended in discouraging failure after a single

day, which was why she'd shown up for club like always that afternoon, I guess.

"Chifuyu... So, just to be sure I have the record straight, nothing bad happened to you at school or anything?"

Chifuyu blinked. "Not really."

"S-So, you seriously *just* wanted to go to high school instead?"

"Yeah," replied Chifuyu without a hint of hesitation.

"Oh, come *ooon*," I droned, slumping into my chair and staring up at the ceiling. "I feel ridiculous for getting all worried now."

A moment later, though, I found myself grinning. A quick glance around confirmed that everyone else was smiling as well.

"That's just so Chifuyu, isn't it?" said Hatoko.

"Looks like we haven't really gotten a handle on how she thinks yet, huh?" added Tomoyo with a chuckle.

Chifuyu, meanwhile, puffed out her cheeks and pouted. "It's not funny," she mumbled.

We quickly stifled our laughter. Right, duh. Of course it'd be rude to laugh about something like this. Chifuyu only did all this stuff because of how badly she wanted to keep spending time with us, after all.

"A question, Chifuyu," said Sayumi. "Is your power hard for you to bear? Awakening to it out of nowhere, having to hide it from the outside world—is all of that too much for you?" Sayumi was smiling, but the look in her eyes was exceedingly grave.

"Mm mm," Chifuyu grunted, shaking her head. "It's okay. I have all of you, so I'm fine. Andou, Tomoyo, Hatoko, Sayumi—if you're with me, everything's fine." She paused for a moment, then added, "Oh, and Kudou too," as an afterthought.

"Is that so?" said Sayumi with a dry chuckle. "Really, now... It would seem I've been underestimating you, Chifuyu."

"Also...I'm glad I got my power," said Chifuyu, clutching Squirrely to her chest. "With *World Create*, I can come here from my school right away. I was getting tired of walking before I got my power, so it worked out perfectly."

Oh, right. I guess Chifuyu did have to walk here whenever she came over to hang out back in the day. As a natural consequence, she arrived later than the rest of us and had less time for club stuff.

"Making lots of stuff to play games with is fun too," Chifuyu added. "Like when we played tennis, and cosplayed, and played with the guitar. I always wanted to play lots of different games with everyone."

She wanted to play with us? Not gonna lie, that feels pretty nice to hear.

"Huh," I said, casually pondering what Chifuyu had told us. "That's interesting. It almost sounds like *World Create* was a power specifically designed to grant your wishes."

"Yeah. I think that's right," agreed Chifuyu. "It's fun, so everything's all okay," she added, flashing a victory sign at the rest of us. I seriously doubt

that she was aiming for it on purpose, but honestly? She somehow made the gesture look *really* cool.

I was starting to think that, just maybe, Chifuyu was the most emotionally tough out of all of us. When I really looked back on it, her innocence, her purity, and her relentless positivity had helped us out of constant rough patches. She never *seemed* to think deeply about much of anything, and yet she had the most uncanny ability to see through to the heart of all sorts of matters.

"So, I'm guessing that by now you've given up on getting admitted to high school early, Chifuyu?" I asked.

Chifuyu frowned. "I don't wanna, but yeah. I can't quit, and studying's hard. I wanna play with Cookie more too."

"Gotcha," I said with a nod.

"But that's fine. I'll catch up with you eventually, even if I can't go to high school."

"Huh...? What do you mean by that?"

"I can't catch everyone else, but I can at least be in the same grade as you, Andou."

What on earth is this kid talking about? Andou Jurai: sixteen years old, with a birthday right around the corner. Himeki Chifuyu: ten years old, with no birthdays coming up until next year. Normally, I wouldn't even have to say this, but closing the age gap between us was completely impossible! I mean, unless I got put into cold sleep or Chifuyu got aged up by The Thankful Death!

"I'll be twelve when I graduate elementary school, so...two more after that...right. I'll catch up with you in four more years, Andou."

In four years? So, when she's fourteen? What? Even if I did somehow stay the same age for the next four years, I'm sixteen right now! We wouldn't be the same age at all! What's the deal here?

The other members of our club were obviously just as confused as I was—or at least, they were, until Sayumi nodded and said, "Oh, of course. I understand now. He he he—yes, indeed, you're just four years away."

"Oh! Oooh! I get it now! Yeah, that checks out," said Tomoyo.

"H-Huh?! What does?!" exclaimed Hatoko. "Tomoyo, fill me in!"

"It's simple, really. It's just that..." Tomoyo leaned in to whisper in Hatoko's ear, and I couldn't hear the rest of their exchange.

"Hmm, hmm... Oooh, *now* I see! Hee hee, that's true, isn't it? They'll be in the same year, all right!"

"Wh-What the heck, guys?! Would someone *please* clue me in already?!" I shouted.

The high school girls all just snickered, but Chifuyu at least opened her mouth. "In four years, I'll be an eighth grader."

An eighth grader.

The eighth grade...

...Eighth grade syndrome.

“That means I’ll be in the same grade as you, Andou. After all, you’ll always be a chuuni.”

I paused. Her words sank in. And, finally…

“Pfff!”

…I erupted in laughter. Yeah, okay. It all makes sense now.

“You’re darn right you will, Chifuyu!” I declared, springing up from my chair and raising my arms up before me, milking the giant cow with all my might. “For my name is Guiltia Sin Jurai, and no matter how many epochs, no matter how many ages pass us by, I shall forever wait for you upon the throne of the great chuuni lords!”

I grinned the coolest, most haughty and arrogant sneer of a smile I could manage, and Chifuyu nodded happily. “Yeah,” she agreed.

“Oh my god, get *real*, chuuni-boy,” Tomoyo sighed with an exasperated shrug.

“What can I say? Juu really will be a chuuni forever,” added Hatoko with a grin.

“‘Epoch’ and ‘age’ are more or less synonymous, by the way, so your expression was redundant. It’s like asking someone for their PIN number,” noted Sayumi. I just *knew* she was trying to ruin my groove on purpose.

And so, the literary club was called into session for a perfectly normal day of activities.

All right—what shall we play today?

Afterword

Long ago, the word “chuunibyou” was considered nothing more than an insult. It was a pejorative, a word used only for the sake of ridicule.

Now, though, times have changed, and the nuance of our vocabularies with them. These days, “chuunibyou” has *positive* connotations more often than not—or at least, it seems that way to me. Think about how people talk about supernatural battle stories, for instance. You hear people say stuff like “yeah, I love how chuuni that series is” or “that one really tickles my inner chuuni” all the time, and they mean it in a distinctly positive way.

I just think that’s sorta funny! If somebody says that a piece of fiction is “super chuuni” or that “its chuuni-level is off the charts,” it’s really difficult to tell whether they mean it as praise or criticism these days. Just like the words “awful” and “awesome” have been molded by the flow of history into forms entirely unlike their original meanings, so too has “chuunibyou” shifted, and so too it continues to shift.

Honestly, “chuunibyou” might very well *already* mean something totally different than it did back when the term was coined. The modern age is a turbulent one, and it’s that age in which this story’s characters are forced to come to terms with the meaning of “chuunibyou” for themselves.

So, yeah, I picked a pretty obnoxious theme for this story, if I do say so myself. I admit it—but I *don’t* regret it.

And with all that said, hi! This is Kota Nozomi. I decided to introduce a character who speaks using the Fukushima dialect in this volume, and truth be told, the version of said dialect that she speaks is based on the dialect from my very own home town. The thing is, though, that the Fukushima dialect is actually pretty variable even within the prefecture. People in Aizu, the northern parts of the prefecture, and Iwaki all speak in subtly different ways, and the Aizu dialect featured in a certain popular TV drama is a little bit different from the one I’m familiar with as well! The point is, please have mercy on me on the accent front.

I should also note that this volume’s page count meant that I wasn’t able to include a prologue for the next volume like I did in volumes one and two! You can rest easy, though, because there *will* be a volume four. Considering the progression so far, I’m willing to bet that you can guess which character will be taking center stage this time as well!

And now, a few words of thanks! First, to my editor, Nakamizo. You have, as always, been an enormous help this volume, and I look forward to working with you on the next one!

Next, to my illustrator, 029. The illustrations this volume were as wonderful as ever—thank you very much! Whenever I see the rough drafts of your drawings, a small part of my withered heart is brought back to life.

And last, I’d like to extend my greatest and most profound thanks to you, the readers who’ve chosen to give this book a try.

That’s all for now! May we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

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Bonus Translation Notes: On Accents

Five pages' worth of this volume's text took almost as much consideration to translate as the rest of the volume combined.

Okay, yes, that's some pretty extreme hyperbole on my part, but it certainly felt that way at the time. Figuring out how we'd be rendering Tamaki's accent was an enormous decision, and the nature of said accent gave us a very limited set of options to choose from! As such, for this volume's TL notes, I figured I'd walk you through our decision-making process for the accent and explain a little of the logic behind how we finally chose to render it.

To begin with, the problem: Tamaki's accent is *extremely* specific, and this specificity is discussed directly within the text. As Kota Nozomi himself noted in the afterword, Tamaki speaks an extremely particular form of the Fukushima dialect. It's not *incredibly* hard to understand if you can understand Japanese on the whole, but it is very distinctive relative to other regional Japanese dialects and has a lot of idiosyncrasies.

The fact that the accent's origins are brought up within the story immediately rules out the option of simply swapping in a real-world English dialect and calling it a day. If we were to, say, make Tamaki speak with a Geordie accent, it would come across as *incredibly* strange when the text later goes on to describe the accent as being both Fukushima-specific and hard to place. That second point in particular was an issue: if we chose to give Tamaki an accent that a reader could potentially identify on their own as coming from anywhere other than Fukushima, the whole logic behind Tomoyo's thoughts on the subject would crumble to pieces.

Speaking of Tomoyo's musings, they *also* imposed a pretty strict set of limitations upon our options for Tamaki's accent. Whatever we chose *had* to mesh with Tomoyo's comments regarding the nature of the dialect. We could, admittedly, have tweaked the specifics of Tomoyo's observations to match up with whatever we chose, but that's the sort of liberty with the original text that you have to be really careful with, particularly when it comes to a distinctive character trait for the most mysterious member of a thirteen volume long series' cast. There are an *infinite* number of ways in which a single careless alteration to Tamaki's accent could come back to bite us in a future volume.

So, appropriating a real-world dialect was out of the picture. That left us with just one good option: make something up ourselves! Making up a dialect, however, is a lot easier said than done, and there are a number of ways in which you can approach the challenge.

One technique that we went out of our way *not* to use: writing common words with deliberate misspellings in order to reflect the fact that they're being said in unusual ways. I didn't actually know that there's a specific

term for that technique going into this volume, but as my editor explained to me, that sort of thing is called an eye dialect.

We chose to avoid using that technique for a number of reasons. To begin with, even if we had tried to keep the misspellings we chose unique, it would have been very easy to accidentally slip into something resembling a stereotypical real-world accent using this technique. Even worse, it would be very easy to accidentally slip into something resembling a pejorative caricature of a real-world accent! The fact that eye dialects have commonly been used historically as a tool to portray characters in a rather derogatory light made that danger all the more pressing. Needless to say, accidentally going down that road would be the absolute worst-case scenario for our portrayal of Tamaki!

As such, we decided to render the words that Tamaki says in exactly the same way we handled the rest of the characters in the series' dialogue. Instead, we turned to the words themselves for our solution: we'd portray Tamaki's dialect by way of her vocabulary!

This mitigated the danger of accidentally stumbling into a real-world dialect quite handily. The sheer size of the English lexicon means that there's almost always a word that's slightly unusual for any given situation that will still be totally comprehensible to your readers, and the odds of accidentally combining those non-standard words into an actual extant dialect are incredibly low.

The one aspect of her accent that this technique *doesn't* allow us to portray are the more auditory components of her dialect—its tonal flatness and the speed at which she talks, for instance—but for one thing, Tomoyo's observations on the subject give the reader ample context to understand those aspects of her speech, and for another, they're not actually portrayed in the Japanese rendition of her dialogue either!

Personally, I believe that our portrayal of Tamaki's dialect is about as faithful to how she speaks in the original text as we could get. Now we just have to keep her word choice consistent and coherent for the next ten volumes! Which, uhh, might be easier said than done! I've already started compiling a glossary, I assure you.

As a side note, if you want an example of an accent that *didn't* require anywhere even close to this much thought and attention, look no further than Squirrely's mess of a speech style. Though his accent is also directly addressed by the text, the fact that it's used for expressly comedic purposes and the fact that it's very specifically stated to be a *failed* attempt at doing a decently convincing accent means we could more or less go to town on it, so long as the end result sounded sufficiently silly. Not all accents require a small essay's worth of thought and planning to render decently!

That brings me to the last point I'd like to bring up in this section: the planning that was put into Tamaki's accent, and the fact that I by no means did all of that on my own. My editor was *heavily* involved in the decision-making process for this particular issue, and frankly, most of the good ideas

were his. I'm basically pulling an Andou-explaining-how-guitar-amps-work here, to be completely honest, and I'd be loath to not give credit where it's due!

And, that's just about all the space I have! I hope this section has given you some context on how a disproportionately tiny portion of a project can end up requiring *way* more thought than you'd ever imagine. Anyway, we've got a metric ton of media references to cover this volume, so here we go!

Chapter 2

Unless you're literally Yukimura from Prince of Tennis...

The Prince of Tennis is a legendary sports manga by Konomi Takeshi that ran in *Shonen Jump* from 1999 to 2008! The series is known for taking the sort of exaggerated special moves and playstyles seen in sports manga to absurd extremes, and Yukimura Seiichi is no exception to that rule. Wearing a jacket like a cape during a match is far from the most ridiculous thing he does over the course of the manga.

They were totally expecting me to call one of my shots the 108th level something-or-other, or structure a gag around the Andou Kingdom, or whatever.

These are both references to *The Prince of Tennis 2* (sometimes known as *The New Prince of Tennis*), a sequel series to the original manga that started in 2009 and is still currently running. "108th level something-or-other" is a play on a move from the Hadokyu series of techniques, which involve charging up shots, and "the Andou Kingdom" is a reference to Atobe Kingdom, a special move used by Atobe Keigo that allows him to analyze an opponent down to the structure of their bones.

She's the spitting image of the Red Bullet himself! / What was that move, the Royal Phoenix #1?!

This passage includes shout-outs to two very obscure tennis manga—Andou really is digging deep for his material this time around! "The Red Bullet" refers to the main character of *Stay Gold*, a tennis manga by Ooshima Tsukasa that ran for just three volumes in 2004 (Not to be confused with *Stay Gold*, a BL manga by Hideyoshiko that ran for six volumes starting in 2012). Apparently, the main character receives the nickname thanks to his signature shot (called the "Bullet Forehand") and the red cap that he wore.

The "Royal Phoenix #1," meanwhile, is a technique used in *Happy!*, a tennis manga by Urasawa Naoki that ran from 1993 to 1999. *Happy!* was notable for dealing with some unusually dark themes for a sports manga, and it's worth noting that Urasawa's next work after *Happy!* concluded serialization was *Monster*, an extremely well-known psychological thriller.

It was just like Shu, the technique Nen ability wielders use to extend their Ten to strengthen weapons and stuff!

We're back in the realm of *Hunter x Hunter* references! We've touched briefly on Nen abilities in previous volumes, but as a refresher, Nen is a power system that's used extensively throughout the series. It's quite complex and gets explained in a ton of detail in the original manga, but in this particular instance, the only necessary context is that Nen abilities

generally involve the user manipulating their aura for combat purposes.

Remember what Kenshin said when he fought Shishio: "Don't let the flames deceive you! The fire itself is hardly lethal at all!"

Speaking of series that have already been extensively referenced, we're back to *Rurouni Kenshin*! Shishio is a character in *Kenshin* who's very fire-themed on the whole—his backstory involves him having been horrifically burned, and he wields a special sword that he can set on fire.

It's almost like the Tezuka Zo—oh, whoops!

Andou almost references the Tezuka Zone in this line, which is an ability in *Prince of Tennis* used by Kunimitsu Tezuka. The ability does indeed resemble what Hatoko does with her powers in that scene, only in the case of *Prince of Tennis*, Tezuka forces his opponents to hit the ball directly back to him by applying extremely powerful and specific spin to it in just the right way.

Is she planning on unleashing the Kaiten Kenbu Rokuren or something?!

The Kaiten Kenbu Rokuren is one of Shinomori Aoshi's techniques in *Rurouni Kenshin*! It's more or less exactly what Chifuyu attempts to do with her tennis rackets, only with swords instead. Andou's next line continues the reference, with the Oniwabanshu being a group that Aoshi is the leader of.

Who are you, that one guy with the boomerang swords in the Trick Tower?!

This is a reference to an extremely minor, literally nameless bit character in *Hunter x Hunter* who gets killed eight pages after he's introduced to the story.

What are you, a Sengoku-era samurai who shouts 'Let's party!' all the time?!

This one's referring to the *Sengoku Basara* rendition of Date Masamune, a real-world historical figure who definitely did not do either of the things Andou mentions here.

What are those, Captain Kuro's Cat Claws?!

Captain Kuro is a *One Piece* character who, as you might have guessed, wears gloves with sword blades at the end of each fingertip.

What is that, Gate of Babylon?!

This one's a *Fate/stay night* reference! Gate of Babylon is Gilgamesh's Noble Phantasm, and if that statement doesn't tell you everything you need to know, then attempting to explain it all within the confines of this notes

section would be a hopelessly lost cause. The extremely long-story-short version is that it's a superpower featured in the series that involves lots of swords.

What is that, Sword Mirage?!

Blade Paradise is a special move from *Shaman King* used by Tao Ren! It makes a ton of bladed weapons—not just swords—shoot up from the ground and do terrible things to his enemies.

What is that, the White Emperor Sword?!

Last Sight: White Emperor Sword is part of Kuchiki Byakuya's Bankai in *Bleach*! As you might expect, it involves condensing a bunch of swords into a single, more powerful sword.

Consider the movie Enchanted, for instance…

I imagine that plenty of readers will be surprised to learn that this section was not, in fact, localized at all! The original text genuinely referenced *Enchanted* explicitly, by name.

Performing a parody means staking two fates upon a single gag…

This entire extended speech is an adapted parody of a scene from early on in *Rurouni Kenshin* in which the main character explains the philosophy behind the style of swordsmanship that he practices—hence Tomoyo's quip about the Swords That Give Life philosophy.

There was the one time I broke my mom's umbrella trying to do an Avan Strash…

The Avan Strash is a special move used by the main character of *Dragon Quest: The Adventure of Dai*, a manga by Sanjo Riku that received two anime adaptations, one of them quite recent! Despite its relative obscurity in the English-speaking anime fandom (which can presumably be attributed at least in part to the manga never getting an official English release), it's one of the *Jump*'s best selling manga of all time.

…and the time I sprained a finger really badly trying to do the Eight Trigrams Sixty-Four Palms taijutsu…

The Eight Trigrams Sixty-Four Palms taijutsu is a technique from *Naruto* that, appropriately, involves sixty-four open palm strikes.

…and the time I actually fractured my hand trying to pull off a Futae no Kiwami…

The Futae no Kiwami is another *Rurouni Kenshin* technique! For the sake of brevity, it more or less involves punching someone really hard in a very particular way.

□ …and the time I lost three baby teeth at once trying to imitate the Three-Sword Style…

We’re back to *One Piece* this time! The Three-Sword Style, created and used by Roronoa Zoro, involves holding one of said three swords in your teeth.

Chapter 3

□ Like, Atobe's special moves are the friggin' best!

We may have left the tennis chapter, but we're still in *Prince of Tennis* territory! This is another reference to Atobe Keigo, who has a ton of special moves with words like "rondo" and "fugue" in them on account of his love of classical music.

□ Y'know that one where you take turns coming up with words that fit into a certain category, and whoever slips up first loses?

This is a pretty common game in Japan! Known as kokon tozai (□□□□, commonly translated as "all times and places"), it's the sort of game you're likely to see teachers appropriate to keep their lessons interesting.

□ So, wait—pronunciation-wise, does that make my guitar the fusion of Colonel Muska and Colonel Roy Mustang?

Andou's already identified Roy Mustang's origins, but Colonel Muska is a villain from Miyazaki Hayao's *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*.

□ There's that bit in Soul Eater where they say that a Meister and their Weapon work like an electric guitar and its amp!

Soul Eater is a manga by Ohkubo Atsushi that ran from 2004 to 2013. The core premise of the series revolves around humanoid weapons—as in, people who can literally turn into weapons—and the people who wield them, who are referred to as Meisters. The guitar/amp comparison that Andou brings up is a bit of exposition from early on in the series, used to establish how its power system works.

□ Naming a guitar is cringe?! Oh, you didn't! You've just made an enemy of every K-On! fan in the country!

K-On! is a manga by Kakifly that was adapted into an *extremely* popular anime by Kyoto Animation in 2009. One of the main characters, Yui, buys a guitar early on in the series and gives it a silly name (□□□, a silly play on "guitar" that's often rendered as Gita).

□ Maria...since when did you learn the Shadow Clone Jutsu?!

The Shadow Clone Jutsu's another *Naruto* ability—the signature ability of Naruto himself, in fact—that lets the user make duplicates of themself.

□ Maria, don't you know that you're squandering your memory capacity by making a physical double of yourself?

Back to *Hunter x Hunter* again! In the original context of the line Andou's paraphrasing, Hisoka (an early antagonist in the series) is explaining how he defeated an opponent who used his Nen powers to make

an almost perfect duplicate of himself mid-combat.

⬜ The copy acts as your En too, right?

Straight into yet another *Hunter x Hunter* reference! This one refers to a character called Kortopi's ability to copy objects. The fact that his copies act as his En basically just means that he can perceive their surroundings. As a note, the English release of the *Hunter x Hunter* manga clarifies that "En is a field that works like radar." The fact the official release felt the need to clarify that with a note sorta says a lot about the complexity of *Hunter x Hunter*'s power system, honestly.

⬜ It's not Ermes's Stand ability either!

JoJo time! Ermes is a character in *JoJo Part 6* whose stand gives her the ability to make magical stickers. When she puts one of her stickers on something, it creates a duplicate of that object, and when she removes it, the duplicate flies off at high speeds to merge back into the original, usually causing significant collateral damage in the process.

⬜ Or maybe I should say I made like Jidanbou unleashing his ultimate Jidan Banzai Strike Festival technique?

The Jidan Banzai Strike Festival is a technique in *Bleach*. It involves its user, Jidanbou, swinging both of his axes down at the ground as hard as he can.

Chapter 4

…I was also planning on having her make the Sakabatou Shinuchi and Zabimaru's Shikai form…

These are, respectively, a sword from *Rurouni Kenshin* and a sword from *Bleach*!

A Shihakushou? Or maybe a Saint Cloth?

Shihakushou is the in-universe term for the outfits that the Shinigami in *Bleach* wear. Cloth, meanwhile, is the in-universe term for the armor that the characters in *Saint Seiya* wear!

It's friggin' Don Patch!

Don Patch (potentially known as Poppa Rocks, depending on if you read the manga or watched the anime) is a character from *Bobobo-bo Bo-bobo*, a comedy manga by Sawai Yoshio that's maybe one of the single strangest series ever put to print in *Weekly Shonen Jump*. The main character fights with his nose hair, and it only gets weirder from there, basically. Don Patch is a character from the series who looks pretty much exactly like Hatoko's costume is described, and the Wiggin' Specialists (who Andou references in a line or two) are characters who fight using a particularly weird style of combat, one of whom is Don Patch.

I mean, I guess it's technically better than going into battle in a set of robust lingerie, defense-wise.

This is a *Dragon Quest* reference! Robust lingerie is a piece of equipment in *Dragon Quest V* and *VI* that's only equippable by female characters.

…armor like that would really only be useful to practitioners of the Sexy Commando style of martial arts.

The Sexy Commando style originates in the series *Sexy Commando Gaiden*, a gag manga which was written by Usuta Kyosuke and ran in Jump from 1995 to 1997. The manga revolves around Hananakajima Masaru, a high schooler and martial arts prodigy who practices the titular Sexy Commando style. The style itself revolves around doing ridiculous nonsense to distract your opponent then taking them out with a cheap shot. It is, needless to say, an extremely silly series.

What, am I out of usable Pokémon? Or did I get hit with a Cord-Cut? Did someone just sever my optic nerve?!

"Out of usable Pokémon" is another reference to the fact that when all of your Pokémon faint in the *Pokémon* games, your character blacks/whites out. Cord-Cuts, on the other hand, are a technique used in *Baki the Grappler*, a long-running martial arts manga by Itagaki Keisuke. The series

is known largely for its absurdly muscular character designs and the ridiculous excess of the techniques they use. The Cord-Cut technique in particular involves the user severing an opponent's "cords"—those being tendons, nerves, blood vessels, or anything else vaguely cord-shaped in a person's body—using a single finger.

Silver Skin Metal Jacket, Demon Magic Armor Lance, Shihakushou, Saint Cloth, Pain Packer, The Final Moon Fang Heaven-Piercer outfit

Out of all the submissions to the cosplay box, these are the ones that are references to specific works of media! They come from, respectively, *Buso Renkin*, *Dragon Quest: The Adventure of Dai*, *Bleach*, *Saint Seiya, Hunter x Hunter*, and *Bleach* again.

Chapter 5

I counter that claim with Mirror Force!

In this and the following lines, Andou and Sagami have gone off on a tangent into a game of imaginary *Yu-Gi-Oh!*

The likes of MAX Coffee shall never disgrace my refined palate!

MAX Coffee is a Japanese brand of canned coffee, notable for being notoriously sweet and the object of the main character of *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*'s obsession. It might be a stretch to claim that this is a reference to that series, but considering its publication started one year before *Supernatural Battles*'s, I also can't rule out the possibility.

How do you react when the person you're meeting arrives looking like an especially avant-garde Stand User?

Stand Users, as you might remember, are people with a particular sort of super power in *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. More relevant than the powers in this case, though, is the fact that the author of *JoJo*'s, Araki Hirohiko, has an extremely unique and inventive sense of fashion that results in many of his characters wearing outfits that practically define the term avant-garde. Araki is, to the best of my knowledge, the only manga artist who can claim to have been part of a crossover exhibit with Gucci, and it really shows in his work.

Plus, the word 'doppio' brings JoJo Part 5 to mind, so I just couldn't resist.

This one's pretty straightforward: Part 5 of *JoJo* features a fairly important character named Vinegar Doppio.

My anti-home-invader techniques would put the Home Alone kid to shame!

This is another reference that I feel obligated to confirm was, in fact, present in the original text! *Home Alone* is surprisingly well-known in Japan.

...but on that day, it was all moumantai!

"Moumantai" is one way to spell a Cantonese phrase that more or less means "no problem." As to why Andou would drop a word of random Cantonese into his internal monologue out of nowhere, it seems very likely that this line was inspired by Terriermon, a character from *Digimon Tamers* who uses moumantai as something of a catchphrase.

She was facedown on her desk and fast asleep yet again, though this time her eye mask had "Sleepy Boy Technique" printed on it.

The Sleepy Boy Technique is a martial arts maneuver used by Jackie Chun, the alter ego of Master Roshi in *Dragon Ball*. The technique involves the user hypnotizing their opponent and forcing them to fall asleep. Whether or not it really counts as martial arts is a matter of some debate.

I sped away, pumping my legs in perfect adherence to the golden ratio and sending Fenrir's wheels into a state of the Spin!

The Spin is a concept introduced in Part 7 of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*! It involves putting objects into a state of perfect rotation, which is justified in-universe with an explanation involving the golden ratio and the golden spiral that's derived from it.

...or if I'd managed to invade DIO's world of stopped time...

As noted in previous volumes, DIO is a *JoJo* character with the power to stop time. In this line, Andou's paraphrasing one of DIO's lines in Part 3, which he says when the part's protagonist, Jotaro, manages to move while time is stopped. The line in question is extremely iconic among the Japanese *JoJo* fandom.

Good grief, elementary schoolers are just the best!

In this line, Andou is quoting Hasegawa Subaru, the protagonist of *Ro-Kyu-Bu!*, a light novel series that got a shout-out back in volume 1 as well. And I mean, like, literally quoting him word for word. In the original context, Subaru's line is in reference to elementary schoolers' ability to learn and adapt at an incredible pace...but considering the overall content of the series, it's kind of hard not to read a decidedly less innocent meaning into the line. Unsurprisingly, said less innocent interpretation led to the line turning into a meme on the Japanese side of the internet, especially on Nico Nico Douga.

I don't even care who I go after. It may as well be you.

Here, Andou's paraphrasing Kurapika from *Hunter x Hunter*. In the original context, Kurapika's threatening to brutalize a thug who holds him at gunpoint. As a side note, this is a very rare instance of a media reference that the anime adaptation of *Supernatural Battles* preserved in very explicit detail, even going so far as to reproduce the art style of the panel in which Kurapika says the line! I plan on going into more detail on the differences between the novels and the anime adaptation in a later TL notes section, but to make a long story short, most of the novels' references were lost in adaptation.

You shall address me only as the Knight of Knights!

This is almost certainly an intentional play on *Night of Nights*, a song from the incredibly popular *Touhou* franchise of bullet hell games.

…or Chifuyu got aged up by The Thankful Death!

One last *JoJo* reference for the road! The Thankful Death is a stand in *JoJo Part 5* that causes its victims to age at a supernaturally rapid pace and eventually drop dead.

That’s all the references this time around! Thanks again for reading, and see you again in volume four!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi's Cringe Chronicles: Part 3

Things I tried to make into my catchphrase when I was a student, #1: "No man can escape the flaws of human nature..."

I liked to mumble this one whenever a seemingly perfect person made a careless mistake, or when an otherwise mild-mannered person let their mean-spirited side slip out for a moment. Specifically, I mumbled it with my chin resting in my hands, doing my best to look down on whoever I was talking about from as far up on high as I could possibly manage.

Illustrator: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works) and *Dragon Lies* (Published by Shogakukan).

Little girls really *are* the best. *Sluuuuuurp*.

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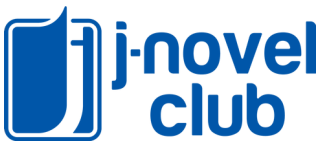

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